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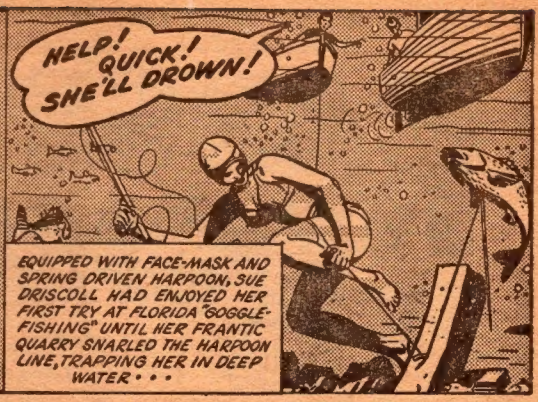

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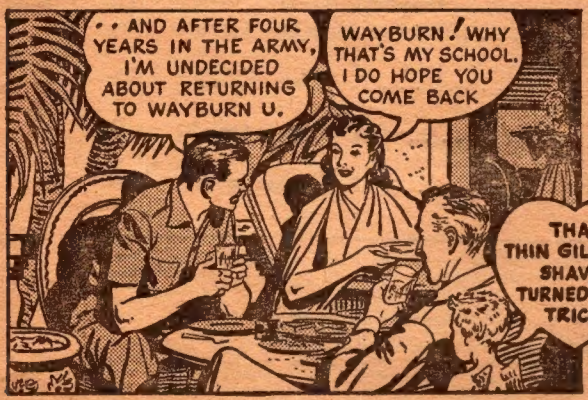
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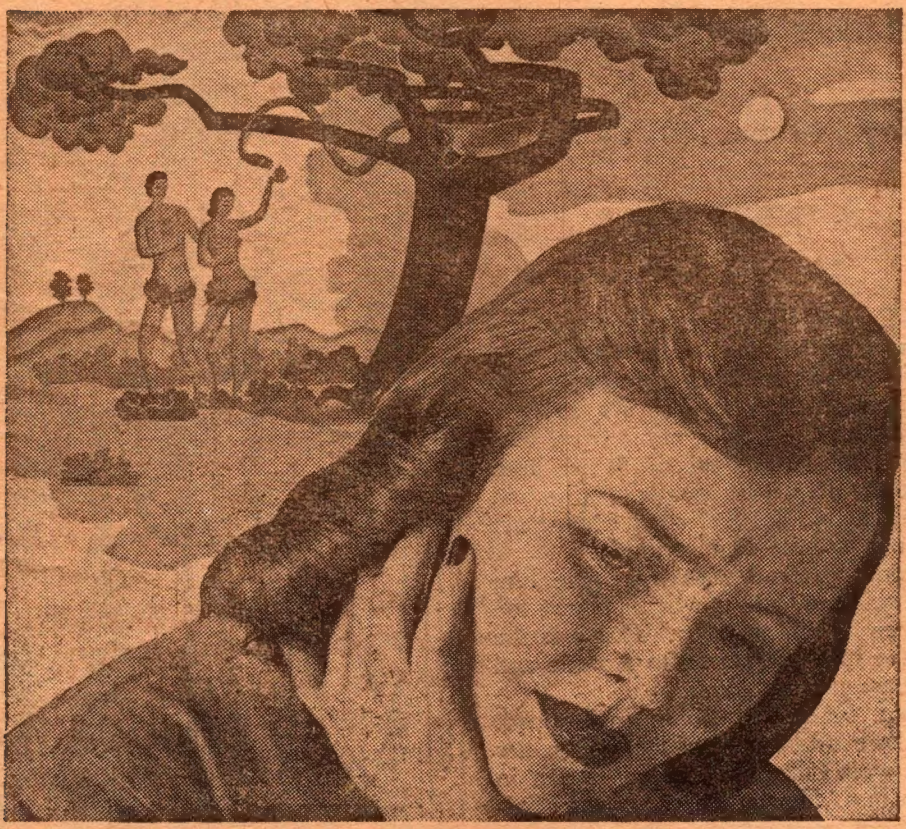

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KISS ME GOOD-BY, ♥ COWBOYS! ♥

Sparkling Novel of Pioneer Sweethearts

By Bill Severn

CHAPTER ONE

"I'm Lonely, Too!"

THE stars were like splinters of the moon in the cool, clear night. The high trellis of rambler roses hid the house porch in gentle shadows as Jess Hunter took Sallie Gibson in his arms. She would let him kiss her because it had been fun to know Jess these two weeks he had been in Goddard. But Sallie had been smart enough not to take Jess seriously.

She could pretend with him, give him this farewell kiss, and it wouldn't hurt too much when he said good-by. That was the way of the men who came to Kansas and went home again to Texas.

Without bitterness, Sallie understood. And if there was a hint of longing in her smile, it wasn't because she had fallen in love with Jess. He was like the others; Sallie hadn't expected anything more.

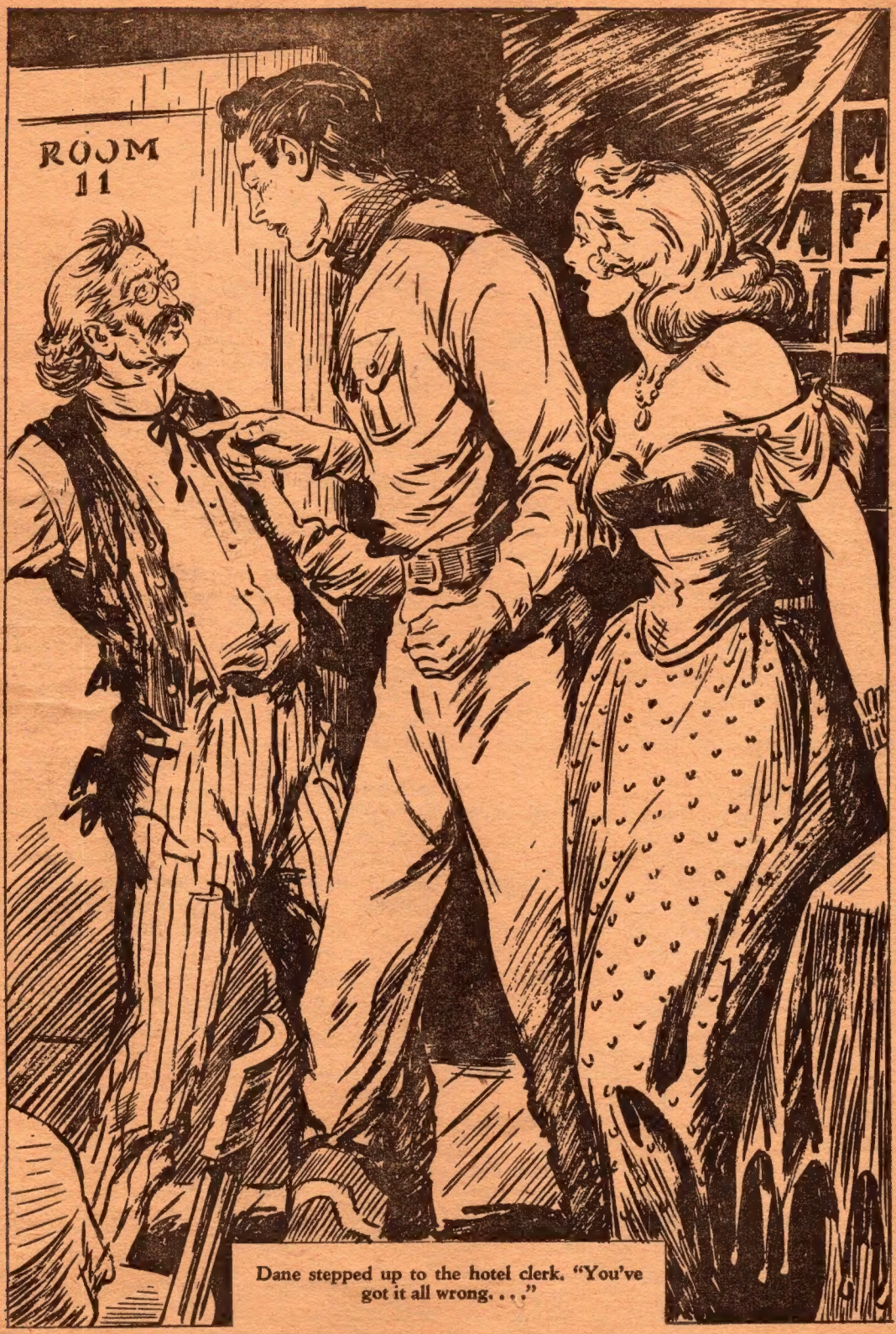
"I'll write you, Sallie," Jess said. "As soon as I get back to Texas, I'll send for you."

"Don't promise, Jess. Don't pretend."

"But I love you. I'll always love you."

Edward had said that, too. And Paul. And Webb. They had meant it while they held her in their arms. But Sallie's knowing heart tenderly interpreted the lie. Jess was nice, but she didn't love him any more

Kansas Sallie could kiss the Texas boys good-by and forget them as fast as they rode away—she hoped!



Dane stepped up to the hotel clerk. "You've got it all wrong. . . ."

than he loved her. He would marry the girl he had left in Texas.

Sallie took his kiss. With her eyes wide open, she looked over his shoulder to the town. Goddard wasn't much, but she knew it seemed like the Promised City to men who drove cattle up here into western Kansas over the long trail from Texas.

They bedded their trail-weary herds and came into Goddard to make their deals with her father and the other buyers. But Goddard meant more to the men than the railroad and the pay-off. These hard men of the trail came into town with their pockets full of money and their hearts full of dreams.

These were the men who had crossed rivers, fought off Indians, battled fires and storms, and quieted stampedes to bring their cattle through. At the end of the trail, they wanted fun and laughter and romance.

And a Kansas girl, if she knew what she was about, didn't take their love too seriously. She could hope, she could long for more. But she knew that the Texas men always said good-by.

Jess said it now, whispering softly, "Good-by, darling."

"Good-by, Jess—" Sallie broke from his arms, held out her hand. "Take care of yourself."

"I'll send for you."

She smiled again, turned her head when Jess bent to kiss her once more.

The next minute, he was gone. He was a shadow, lost among the other shadows, moving away into the darkness.

Sallie sighed and shut her eyes a second. But it didn't really hurt. She had understood it would be like this. She didn't let herself believe in him.

A deep voice asked:

"Do you kiss them all good-by?"

She jumped, squinted into the darkness at the side of the porch.

That deep, teasing voice out of nowhere asked again, "Do they all rate kisses?"

"I—beg your pardon?" Sallie saw him then, tall and slender, studying her with amusement as he leaned against the porch railing.

He laughed and stepped into the half-light. His eyes were as dark-brown as his hair. A smile twisted his large mouth into a crooked, friendly grin. "No need to beg my pardon. I enjoyed it. You put on a good show." The drawl was clearly Texas.

Sallie felt the warmth that filled the hollow of her cheeks and was glad for the semi-darkness. Her head lifted with a proudly defiant shake that whispered blonde curls across her bare shoulders. "A gentleman," she said, "would have made his presence known."

"I didn't want to spoil your fun." His eyes skipped over her, lifted to hers. "You came out as I was about to pull the bell and you were in his arms before I could—"

"Who are you?" Sallie pulled her eyes from his. "What do you want here this time of night?"

"Dane Coleman." He shook his head. "So you're Sallie Gibson. I've heard about you—'The Sweetheart Of The Trail.' But I didn't expect to see you in action."

"Oh!" She turned to the door, opened it.

"You are beautiful. They said you would be."

"They?" Sallie frowned.

"All the men who have seen you. The ones who would like to fall in love with you." Dane came closer. "Somehow, I can't believe the rest of it, though. You don't look like a girl with a wooden heart." His head tilted to the side. "You've never met the right man, that's all."

"If you're through discussing my life, perhaps you'll state your business here!" Sallie gripped the door. "If you have business here!"

"Two thousand head of cattle to sell your father." But he spoke as if he weren't thinking of cattle. His eyes stayed upon her, direct, searching. "I sent him a message. Probably, he didn't get it. But I have to close the deal tonight. My men are restless. They want their pay. If he won't buy, I'm moving up to the Indian country to sell direct."

"Father's not home."

"Mind if I wait awhile?"

SHE hesitated. Her shoulders lifted slightly. "Come in." Sallie walked ahead of him into the parlor. She nodded to the chair. "He should be back in half an hour."

"I don't mind waiting." Dane grinned once more.

Sallie turned her back to him, took a book from the table and twisted the knob of the

oil lamp so it gave the room more of its flickering yellow light. Settling herself on the sofa, she opened the book.

"You didn't answer me," Dane said.

"Answer—you?"

"About the man you kissed good-by. You don't love him. I could tell that from the way you—"

"I hardly think that's any of your business." Sallie turned a page, nervously smoothed her wine-colored skirt and straightened the low neckline of the blouse across her shoulders .

"Maybe not. But I'm curious."

"You—you're—i m p e r t i n e n t!" She pressed her lips tight. "I'm trying to read—"

Dane's full laugh interrupted. He got up, took the book from her hand, turned it around. "Might be easier if you read the book the way it was printed, right side up."

"Why, I—" Sallie glanced at the book. She slammed it shut and stood up. "A gentleman would have paid no attention to—"

"You can forget that line," Dane drawled. "I'm not claiming any prizes for being a gentleman." He didn't move. "We were talking about you."

"I don't care to talk to *you* about anything. If you have business with my father, that's his affair."

"Your affairs interest me more. Do you get some special kick out of playing at love, having men throw themselves at you, telling them lies and giving them your kisses?"

"That's not true! I let Jess kiss me good-by because I liked him and he was lonely. I couldn't hurt him by—"

Dane said, "You've been hurt yourself, haven't you? And you can't believe any man. That's why you've made a game of it. . . . Don't you care what they say about you?"

"They have no right to say anything!" Sallie backed a step. "Jess had been on the trail for weeks without seeing a woman. I was—sort of a symbol to him of everything he had left behind. And I did like him."

"The way you liked all the others you kissed good-by?"

"They kissed me good-by. . . . And you needn't say it as if I had made love to—to a whole army or something. Just because I've met a few men I liked—" She shut her eyes. "If it makes some lonely man a little happier to imagine he's in love with me, why should you or anybody else—"

"You poor kid," Dane said softly. "How lonely *you* must be."

Sallie's head lifted. "Don't try to pity me. Don't try to twist—"

"That's all a kiss means to you? Good-by to someone who's been nice?"

"I didn't say that."

Dane's arms came around her suddenly. He pulled her close and he was still smiling that way, half-teasing. But the smile wasn't in his eyes. They were deeply serious, more serious than his words. "I'm lonely, too, Sallie. I've been on the trail for weeks. Can you spare a few kisses to—"

Sallie raised her hands against him, turned her head. "Don't you dare!"

"Why not? What did Jess have that I—"

"He was a friend."

Dane kissed her. His kiss was hard, full, as direct as the way he had looked at her, as searching as the questions he had asked.

Startled by the abrupt demand that was so much deeper than her anger had been prepared to meet, Sallie's heart pounded. Against her will, a wild, singing response swept through her, tingling, alive. She had given her kiss to Edward and to Paul and to Jess. But this was different. She wasn't giving this kiss. Dane was taking it!

And she wouldn't let any Texas man make her feel like this. She hammered her fists on his shoulders, struggled in his arms while he kissed her again.

Sallie twisted furiously in his arms, fighting him and fighting herself. She tore away from him.

For a second, they stood facing each other. Dane's eyes were half-closed, wondering, questioning, as if he were trying to answer a million sudden thoughts in the confusion of his mind. He looked as startled as Sallie had been by what had come of that half-teasing kiss.

His arms reached for her once more.

Sallie fell back. "Get out!"

"Not yet." The smile touched his mouth. Unsteadily, Dane tried to hold it. "You don't want me to go."

She strode to the door, flung it wide. "I said—get out!"

Dane hesitated, crossed slowly to the door. "It's a habit with you, isn't it—saying good-by?" His mouth hardened and shut out the smile. "Even if I told you I

could fall in love with you, you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

"Love?" Sallie forced a tight laugh. "Grabbing me, kissing me like—like—Why, you don't even know me!" She tossed her head. "And I certainly don't want to know you!" She pointed. "There's the road, Cowboy! Hit it!"

Dane shook his head. "You're not really that hard," he said quietly. "You just think you are."

She threw her weight against the door so it hit him and pushed him to the porch. She slammed the door. Hands shaking, Sallie fumbled with the bolt, shoved it into place.

He was so quiet for a moment, she thought he had gone. When he did speak, his voice was hard and abrupt. "Tell your father I was here. He'll find my outfit camped north of town. If he wants to make a deal, I'll be there until sunup tomorrow. Then I'm moving on."

"I'll tell him, all right! I'll tell him what kind of man you are, coming to his home like this and—" Her hands flew to her lips. "If you know what's good for you, you'll head out of Goddard as fast as you can get!"

"Don't take it so big." His laugh was as forced as hers had been. "What's one more kiss to you?"

Sallie swung away from the door. The whole room went red in her eyes as she heard Dane's boots clump swiftly down the steps.

She bounced herself into the sofa, kicked aside the book. It fell to the floor with a dull, final thud.

Sallie put her hands to her face. She hated Dane! *Hated* him! No man had a right to make her feel this upset. . . .

When father came in, Sallie was in bed. She started to call to him, to tell him what had happened. Instead, she turned her face to the pillow. She huddled her face deep in the pillow and pretended that she was asleep.

But she didn't sleep. Sallie lay awake, staring into the darkness, remembering that kiss and everything Dane had said. She tossed and turned and fought the covers. She squeezed shut her eyes, trying to shut out his face and begging sleep, until her eyes hurt.

All night long, she couldn't sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Convenient Kisses. . . .

THE morning sun came into Sallie's room slowly, not seeming to move at all. The gray shadows lingered after the first rays had climbed the window sill and spilled across the wide floor planks to her bed. It spread up the covers, struck her face. Sallie felt that searching spot of heat upon her eyelids even as she shut her eyes against it.

With the sun up, Dane would be gone. He and his cattle would be poking up the trail into the sun, away from Goddard. She had said good-by to him without hardly having said hello.

That's what I wanted, isn't it? I told him to hit the road.

Sallie sat up in bed, watched the sun inch higher on the wall. She was glad now she hadn't told father about Dane. Father would have been furious enough to organize a posse and go after him. And she didn't really want Dane to get into that kind of trouble.

She didn't want to make that much of it. It was over now and she should forget it. A stranger had come into her home and had angered her by what he said. He had stolen a kiss and she had put him in his place.

Apparently, Dane had been smart enough to realize what action the men of the town might take if she aroused them with her story of his bold attempt to make love to her.

Sallie got out of bed and stood a moment in the strong sunlight, let its penetrating warmth bathe her firmly-rounded young body through the sheer gown. Combing out her hair so it tumbled free to her shoulders, she went to the window and filled her lungs, lifted her chest high with the fresh morning air. A brisk wind stirred little whirls of dust across the flat ground outside the window, played with the loose folds of her gown.

She let the air out of her lungs with a sigh, looked down the road, wondering how far Dane had gone by now.

Stop it, Sallie. Stop thinking about him!

She shut her eyes. From a distance, she heard the bellowing of the great herds of

cattle that had been driven up the trail to await buyers. Somewhere, a dog barked and there was the faraway clop of a lone horse. It was early. Most of Goddard was still as soundly asleep as her father, whose snoring Sallie could hear from the next room.

A shadow fell across her face, came between her and the sun. Sallie blinked. She stared unbelievingly. "You!"

"Yes," Dane said, grinning wide as he enjoyed her surprise. "Didn't really think you could scare me out of town, did you?"

He was directly outside the window, as close to her as if he were in the room. How long had he been there at the side of the house, waiting for her to wake?

Sallie looked at herself. Her cheeks crimsoned. She pulled back from the window, scurried across the beam of strong sunlight and caught up her robe from the chair. Working her arms into it, tying the sash, she warned, "If you know what's good for you—"

"I do know what's good for me." Dane smiled again as she pulled the robe tight. "That's why I came back."

Sallie knew she should be angry, furious with him, for coming back like this. But she couldn't find the anger. As she looked at Dane, her heart lifted and her pulses quickened with an unreasoned tingling that rushed the blood to her head. "Father's asleep in the next room. If he catches you here like this—"

"Then, you didn't tell him about last night?"

"I—I will unless you—"

"I didn't think you'd tell him." Dane reached through the window, took her hand. "Sallie, I'm sorry about—what happened."

The touch of his hand started that quick warmth up her arm all over again. She searched his expression, trying to decide what Dane meant. Was he sorry he had kissed her, or was he sorry for what he had said, or—

"I couldn't sleep, Sallie. I was thinking about you all night."

And I couldn't sleep, thinking of him.

He pulled her down to him. Gently, he kissed her.

It wasn't like that other kiss. His lips were tenderly seeking, pleading, their demand held back by what he wanted his kiss to say.

Sallie raised her hand to hold him away. Her fingers touched his shoulder. Her hand tightened. Slowly, her arms went around him.

WITH a catch of her breath that was half a sob, she leaned forward so that only the lifting pressure of her toes kept her from falling all the way through the window into Dane's arms. Her heart went crazy and she couldn't think. She didn't want to think.

"Darling," Dane whispered huskily. "Sallie, darling."

"Dane!"

Her arms still holding him, Sallie moved back a little, looking at him again, wanting to see it in his eyes and in his smile, wanting to believe.

"Sallie!" her father called sleepily, gruffly, from the other room. "Is that you?"

She pulled back from the window, her glance cautioning Dane to silence. She made her own voice sleepy, too. "What? . . . Did you call, Father?"

"Who you talking to?" His bed squeaked. Father's feet hit the floor.

"Hurry!" Sallie pointed to the rear of the house. "Dane, please! He mustn't find you here!"

Dane smiled lovingly, caught her hand and held it hard against his cheek a moment. "Darling, I'll be back."

"Yes—oh, Dane, yes!" Her lips made a kiss for him as he ducked below the window, moved rapidly along the side of the house.

Sallie ran to her bed, plunged beneath the covers and pulled them up to her neck to hide the robe. Innocently, she blinked at her father as he opened the door, came into the room. She wondered if the joy that must show in her eyes would give her away.

Father glanced around the room, grunted. "Thought I heard you talking?" He rubbed his eyes.

"I—I must have been talking in my sleep." That wasn't exactly a lie. All of it was wonderful enough to have been a dream. Except that the lasting warmth of Dane's kisses was far too real to be part of any dream.

Father yawned. "Go back to sleep, Sallie. It's early."

"Yes, Father."

But she was too excited to sleep. She heard a horse go up the road, its hoofbeats so quiet the horse might have been tip-toeing. Sallie shut her eyes and hugged the pillow tight. Dane had promised, *Darling, I'll be back. . . .*

Sallie hummed all the while she was fixing breakfast, turning the golden-brown flapjacks in the pan, cutting a square of rich yellow butter, filling the jug with thick sweet syrup. There never was a morning as wonderful as this, she thought, carrying the plates into the dining room and setting the table for her father. Never was the sun this bright! Never were there so few clouds in a Kansas sky!

Father beamed at her across the table. "You sound like a humming bird. I reckoned you'd be scowling all over the place this morning, after Jess—"

"Oh, Jess." The quick toss of Sallie's head dismissed Jess as if he never had been.

The door pull sounded as they were finishing the meal. For a second, Sallie couldn't move. It tinkled again and she got up so fast she almost tipped the chair.

She opened the door for Dane, gave him her hand. He held it tight, let his fingers talk to hers, said again with his smile, *"Sallie, darling."*

"You—wanted to see my father?" Her conspiring grin matched his.

Dane winked at the secret they shared. "Yes, if he's home. I'm Dane Coleman. Like to talk to him."

Later, they would tell father. But it wouldn't do to let him guess they already knew each other. She didn't want to explain about last night and this morning. Dane understood that.

It was all Sallie could do to hide what she felt as she showed Dane into the parlor, waited for father to come in.

Dane introduced himself. "I've got two thousand head I brought up the trail."

"Heard last night your outfit came through." Father was a shrewd bargainer. "Heard some other talk, too. You were thinking of moving on up into Indian country and selling direct."

"Not if I can get a good price here."

Father shook his head. "Don't try to bluff me, Coleman. I know your men walked out. You have to stay in Goddard and take what you can get."

Sallie's heart dropped. Her father's words hit her as if all the walls of the room had collapsed and crushed down upon her. She tried to look at Dane and couldn't.

"You're wrong," she heard Dane say. "I could move on, Gibson. And there are other buyers here."

But Dane's answer wasn't convincing. Her father had called his bluff.

He didn't stay because of me. He stayed because he had to sell his cattle. Was that why Dane had made love to her this morning? After last night, did Dane feel he had to put himself in right with her before he would dare come here to talk business with her father?

Sallie's head lifted slowly. She forced herself to look at Dane. He must know what she was thinking.

Dane didn't turn away. He met her glance directly, asking her to trust him, to believe in him.

What can I believe? Her mind told her Dane had lied to her so he could use her. But her heart told her that those kisses couldn't have been lies.

"Well, I'll look over what you have, Coleman," father said. He turned to Sallie. "Want to come along for the ride, dear?"

"Why not?" she answered lifelessly.

"I'll get the horses." Father paused at the door. "Better change into something you can wear riding, Sallie."

She nodded. The room was quiet as he went out. Too quiet.

"I know what you're thinking." Dane crossed to her, took her hands. "But you're wrong. This has nothing to do with us. Darling, please—you must believe me."

"I wish I could." She freed her hands.

Dane said slowly, carefully, "You've played at love so much, you can't believe it when it's real. Is that it, Sallie?"

"You might have told me, instead of pretending you stayed here because of me."

Dane's eyes held steadily to hers. "I told you the truth—I love you. I stayed here because I had to see you again and make you understand." Dane waited for her to look up. When she didn't, he said, "If you love me, you'll know that's the truth."

"Then, maybe I don't love you." Sallie's voice was very small. "Maybe it happened too fast for either of us to be honest about—" Her words trailed off. Sallie's mouth twisted, but it wasn't really a smile.

"It's funny, isn't it, Dane? The men who thought they were in love with me, I understood their feeling for what it was. They were lonesome and they found me attractive and, for awhile, they thought it was love. Now it's happened to me—because I was lonesome and because I wanted so much to believe this could be love."

"Sallie, stop it! You're saying words you don't mean. This is different. I *do* love you!"

Sallie shook her head. "I'd better change, Dane." She turned. "Father will be waiting for us."

"Sallie!"

She crossed to her room, shut the door behind her.

CHAPTER THREE

Wake Up and Dream

THE sun was hot, striking straight down at Sallie. Her thin white silk shirt stuck to her and she felt as if she had been poured into the tight jeans. She shouldn't have come with Dane and her father. There was no sense to it, no reason to be here.

It was torture to ride beside Dane, unable to look at him. Why *had* she come? It was finished between them—done. She could have made excuses to father for not taking the ride. That would have been far less awkward than this.

"Here we are." Dane pointed as they rode up beside the corrals choked with cattle, great black patches blistering the brown earth.

They got down. Sallie lagged behind as her father walked with Dane to the nearest fence, his practiced glance inspecting the cattle. Father squinted in the direction of the chuck wagon. "I see you still have a few men."

"Some of them stuck," Dane said. "The rest wanted their pay and they got it. But I can still pick up enough hands to move the outfit on if I don't get my price." He was speaking to her father, but he sounded as though he were talking to her, telling her, *You see, I did have another reason for staying. I had to stay because of you. . . .*

"Don't bluff, Coleman," her father said again.

But maybe Dane wasn't bluffing. Her heart quickened with a moment's hope. If only she could believe—

"Shorty!" Dane called to one of the men. "Cut out a few steers so Mr. Gibson can look at them. And be careful of that gate. The way they've been pounding at it all night, it's ready to bust wide."

The man he had called "Shorty" nodded, and waved two other men away from the chuck wagon to help him. Dane and her father talked weights and condition and prices. From father's expression, Sallie realized he respected Dane as a clever trader.

Yes, he *was* clever. She walked up to the chuck wagon, seeking shelter from the sun. Sallie sat on the back step, looking at Dane, so tall and straight beside her father. *Was I wrong?* Had she been too quick to draw up her defenses against being hurt again by a Texas man? "You've played at *love so much, you can't believe it when it's real . . . Is that it, Sallie?"*

She couldn't think. Her feet throbbed with the heat. She wanted to take off her pinching boots, but she knew she would never get them on again. The jeans were so tight at her waist she could hardly breathe.

There was a sudden, splintering crash, like a sharp crack of lightning.

Dane shouted. Sallie swung her head in time to see the corral fence go down in a cloud of dust. She heard her father's yell, the warning cries of the men. Dane called again:

"Sallie! Sallie—run!"

There was thunder as the cattle broke free—bellowing, ground-shaking thunder. The rolling black mass of steers pounded toward the chuck wagon.

Sallie leaped to her feet. A scream caught in her throat. She ran, looking back over her shoulder. Something on the ground tripped her. She fell to the ground.

Madly, that storm swept closer. Heads low, horns out-thrust, trampling the grass, the cattle crashed through the brush, destroying everything in their path.

Sallie's hands clawed the ground. She struggled to drag herself forward. Fighting, praying, she watched the cattle fan out until there was no path of escape.

She shut her eyes, drew in her arms and legs, braced herself. The sudden weight that fell across her knocked out her breath.

For a minute, Sallie thought one of the steers had rushed in from the side. Then she realized that Dane had thrown himself down and was shielding her with his body.

Dane's arms came around her, held her tightly. Her nerves screaming, every muscle quivering, she heard Dane whispering her name over and over again.

The thunder, the choking dust, shut off his words. The swarming cattle now had thinned out all around them. A hoof crunched the earth at her side. She heard the thud, felt the agonized tightening of his arms. Then there was nothing at all.

Silence. Weakly, Sallie opened her eyes. She looked at Dane. His eyes were shut. But with a mighty, swelling gladness in her heart, she saw the lift and fall of his chest.

The others were around them then. Father lifted her to her feet. "Sallie—are you all right?"

"Dane! He—he's been hurt!"

Dane turned on his side as if he had heard Sallie's voice. He struggled to lift himself to his elbows, shook his head, fell back again.

Bending to him, Sallie saw the spreading dark red stain of blood that seeped through the ripped cloth above his twisted left boot. "His leg! It's—"

Father swung to Shorty. "Get a wagon hitched." Carefully, he scooped his arm under Dane's legs, lifted him from the ground while one of the other men helped.

They carried Dane to the wagon, put him in the back of it. Sallie got in with him, held her arms around him and rested his head on her shoulder.

Father looked from Dane to Sallie. "You're in love with him, aren't you?" he asked quietly.

Sallie nodded.

Father didn't ask how or when or why she had fallen in love with Dane, or whether she had met him before today. It was as if he could read all the answers that mattered in Sallie's expression, that single nod as she gently cradled Dane's face against her shoulder.

"He's a good man," father said. "We'll take him home and care for him." He turned. "Shorty, ride in and get the doctor. Send him to my house."

Sallie held Dane, tried to protect him against the jolting sway of the wagon as father raced it over the rutted road into Goddard. When they slowed before the house, Dane stirred in her arms. His shoulders tensed and he jerked forward. "Sallie? Sallie, where are—"

"Here, darling." Her fingers stroked his forehead, eased him close again. "Here with you, Dane. Don't try to talk."

Dane's hand groped for hers. "Sallie?"

She caught his hand, squeezed his fingers tight. "Quiet, my darling." Tenderly, she kissed his cheek, held her mouth against his cheek until she felt him relax. "It's going to be all right now."

Father carried Dane into the house. "Put him in my room," Sallie said.

ANXIOUSLY, she waited outside the door while father put Dane to bed. She went in then and sat beside Dane, holding his hand, wondering why the doctor took so long.

And those worried minutes after Doc arrived seemed hours. Sallie sat in the parlor, waiting, waiting. She got up and paced the room and came back, tried to sit still again.

She sprang from the chair when her father came out with Doc. Hurrying to them, she searched their faces. Father was smiling; Doc nodded that it was all right. Sallie felt weak all through. For a minute, she thought she would cry.

"Mostly shock," Doc said. "Knocked him cold. 'Course, we can't tell yet what else might be wrong But I don't think anything's broken. His leg is sprained and cut bad." Doc pursed his lips, looked sideways at Sallie. "But having you around should help him recover pretty fast. Let him rest and tell him to take it easy on that leg—use a cane for a few days. But he should walk on it just as soon as he can, so that it won't stiffen up. I'll drop in tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you." Sallie felt like hugging Doc.

"You'll take good care of him, I reckon." Doc snapped his black bag shut and smiled once more.

Sallie sat beside the bed all afternoon. When it was time to fix supper, she left the door open so that she could hear Dane if he recovered consciousness. After supper, she told father she would sleep on the sofa in the parlor so she would be near if Dane needed her.

Father smiled understandingly. "Take it easy, Sallie. He'll be all right."

She tip-toed into the room and got her slippers and her robe. Dane seemed to be sleeping easily. His breathing was more relaxed. Leaning close, she kissed him lightly. "Good night, Dane."

In his sleep, he grinned and tucked his arm around the pillow she had hugged this morning.

Turning the lamp low, Sallie closed the door part way, went into the parlor and took off her things. She slipped her arms into the robe, gathered it loosely around her.

Through the front windows, moonlight filled the parlor with a mellowed silver. The soft night wind that puffed the curtains carried in the sweet perfume of the rambler roses that grew at the side of the porch.

Curling on the sofa, Sallie turned her face to the moon. Its glow covered her with a filmy blanket of shadows. She slept quickly, peacefully, hurrying to Dane in her dream.

It was a wonderful dream. But like most dreams, it didn't make much sense. Dane was with her, they were riding together through the moonlight, deep in a woods darkened by star-reaching pines. He was holding her hand. And yet he seemed to be calling to her from far away, whispering her name.

Sallie turned on the sofa, rolled on her back and tried to stretch her legs. The sofa was too short and her foot kicked the arm. She blinked awake.

"Sallie—" She heard her name once more and knew she wasn't dreaming. Dane had recovered consciousness.

She swung her legs around, got up. She took a step toward the room and stopped. Dane was standing in the doorway, the moonlight full upon him as his hands gripped the frame of the door tightly for support.

"It *is* you," he whispered. "Thank God, you're all right!" He tried to move forward, caught the door again. "I saw you lying there and I didn't know if I was dreaming or—"

Sallie went to him. "You shouldn't be out of bed, Dane. You were knocked out. Father and I brought you home. Your leg—"

"I'm okay. I just didn't know where I was for a minute—or what had happened" He hugged her close. "You *are*—safe? You weren't hurt?"

"You saved me." Her eyes filled as she said softly, "I love you—"

His kiss made her words a tingling secret between them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trouble Rings Twice

SALLIE let Dane sleep late in the morning. She walked quietly past the closed door of the room, not wanting to disturb him. Doc said he would be all right if he got the rest he needed. Besides —Sallie smiled a secret smile—she didn't want to wake him if he was dreaming the dream she had slept upon after they kissed good night.

She fixed a special breakfast for Dane, a big platter of crisply-fried ham and hen-fresh eggs, biscuits she had made with butter. Arranging the tray, she decided finally to go in to him.

"Dane?" Sallie knocked on the door and waited a second. Old sleepy-head. "Dane," she called again, opening the door. "Good morning, darl—" Her words broke and she caught her breath.

Sallie gripped the tray tight. Her smile died.

Dane wasn't there!

The bed was made. His things were gone.

For a second, Sallie thought he might be hiding, teasing her. She put down the tray and went to the closet. "Dane?" There was no answer. The closet was empty.

Sallie stared at the open window. Dane must have climbed out the window. But, *why?*

Her breath held high in her lungs with a sharp, stabbing pain that tightened around her heart. Surely, he wouldn't go without even saying good-by? But if there were some other explanation, why had Dane climbed out the window, sneaked out without going through the house?

Oh, no! Dane, no! She couldn't believe it. She wouldn't believe last night had been another lie.

Sallie turned to the door. Maybe she had missed him while she had been in the kitchen. That hardly seemed likely, but he

might possibly have gone out to the porch.

There was a noise behind her. Sallie whirled around. The sound came from outside the window. She hurried over, looked out.

Dane was limping up the alley at the side of the house, leaning on a cane. At first, she felt only the relief of knowing he had come back.

He saw her and smiled. But Dane's eyes avoided hers an instant, guiltily. And she knew he had hoped to get back into the room without being discovered.

Dane held up his hand, lifted the bunch of flowers he was carrying. "I brought you some wild roses, darling."

The explanation was a little flat. Sallie asked, "What are you doing out there?"

He looked down a second. "Thought you were still asleep. I didn't want to wake you." His head came up too quickly. "I had to go to the post office to mail a letter and I figured I should get myself a cane." He lifted that.

What letter was so important to Dane he must send it first thing this morning? The answer slapped her. *Dane has another girl. He has a girl back home in Texas. Like all the others, his real love is the girl he left behind.*

She tried to shut the frightening thought from her mind. That couldn't happen again. Not with Dane.

"Sallie what's the matter? Why are you staring at me like that?"

Was I staring, or is that his own guilty conscience? What else but another girl would make Dane sneak out the window, limp against the pain of his leg all the way to the post office?

"I fixed breakfast, Dane. It's ready for you." Sallie didn't look at him. She was afraid to see what might be in his eyes. "Better use the door. You'll hurt yourself, climbing through the window."

Sallie went through the house to open the front door for him. She watched him climb the steps and realized what effort his walk to the post office must have cost. She held out her hand to help him and he squeezed her fingers to his side.

Taking a rose from the bouquet, Dane fumblingly slipped the stem beneath the sash of her dress to fasten the flower at her waist. His arm went around her, hugged her close.

She turned her head away.

"Sallie—what is it? What—?"

"Oh, Dane—" She had to know. She looked right at him. "You went to the post office to mail a letter to another girl, didn't you? The girl you have back home in Texas."

His arm came away slowly. "Yes," he said.

"You sneaked out, trying to hide it from me, trying—"

"Because I knew you'd take it like this. I knew if I tried to tell you—" Dane shook his head. "You doubted me before, Sallie. I love you too much to want that to happen again. That's why I had to—"

"You love *her*! But she's miles away—and I'm here. So you pretended like the rest of them to—"

"Stop it, Sallie!" Dane caught her shoulders, held her. His mouth was tight. "I did think I was in love with Lolly, yes. Before I met you. . . . This morning I wrote to her telling her that it was all off, that I had found you. I told Lolly I never could love anyone but you. Oh, Sallie, can't you believe me? Don't you love me enough to have faith in me?"

Sallie's eyes met his. "Dane—you wouldn't lie? You *couldn't* do that to me?"

He kissed her. Dane held her like he would never let her go.

Sallie's arms went around him. She wanted to believe him, to trust him. She had to believe him!

Lifting her face to his, she threw away her doubts, gave herself completely to the wild abandon of her eager heart.

They kissed again and once more. Finally, Sallie touched her fingers to his lips. "Better eat your breakfast, darling. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not for breakfast."

She laughed and moved from him. Her eyes promising a lot and teasing a little, she ducked his arms, swayed across the porch. Still smiling that way, Sallie pulled the crushed rose from her sash. "It was such a pretty flower. And now, look what you've done to it."

Dane grinned. "Plenty more where that came from. I've got the whole bunch. And after we use those up—"

"Silly." She opened the door. "Dane, behave!" She laughingly twisted away from the pat of his hand. "Now, go in

and eat your breakfast," Sallie pointed.

He caught her arm, kissed the elbow, ran his kisses lightly down her arm to her pointing fingertip and playfully pretended to bite the end of her finger. "Rather eat you."

"Get along, Cowboy!" But Sallie laughed again. "Get!"

DANE stayed with them two weeks and then moved to the hotel. "It's not right to impose on you and your father this way," he explained. "You've been swell to me, but I can get around by myself now and—well, I worry about you, sleeping on that calf-sized little sofa every night."

It *was* uncomfortable; she had insisted upon sleeping in the parlor so he could keep her room. Sallie realized that Dane's feeling of imposing was genuine. But she worried when he left for the hotel. Was he making the break to get away from her gradually, to let her down easily? Now that his leg had healed, did Dane feel restless to get home to Texas?

Sallie shook the doubt from her mind. She had promised him, and promised herself, she would never question his love again.

Dane seldom spoke of his plans. Time went so quickly when they were together, the days and nights were so short; tomorrow always seemed to be upon them before they were finished with today. Once, Dane told her, "You'd love the ranch down in Texas, Sallie." But another time, he said, "This is a good town for a man with cow knowledge to settle in."

She guessed that he hadn't decided yet what he wanted to do. He had the money her father had paid for his cattle. Wherever he finally made up his mind to live was all right with Sallie, as long as she was with him.

Father had warned her against rushing Dane into anything. "Naturally, I'd like to have you both stay here in Goddard with me after you and Dane are married," he said. "But his ranch means a lot to him, Sallie. You must let him decide." Father patted her arm. "I'll talk to him, though. I can use a man like Dane in my company, if this is where he wants to stay."

Dane hadn't yet asked her to marry him, not in so many words. But it was that third Friday that he asked her to the dance.

His invitation was casual; another evening they would spend together. "I think this old leg is good enough to hobble around on tomorrow night, if you'd like to go. We've never danced together, Sallie." There was a secret excitement in his smile, a poorly concealed eagerness in the way he said it that made Sallie suspect Dane had something more important than dancing in mind for Saturday night.

"I'd love to go." And she was eager, too. Eager to say, *"Oh, Dane, yes—I'll marry you."*

Working by the light of the oil lamp, Sallie stayed up until almost dawn, sewing the deep rose gown she would wear for Dane. She tried it on, turned herself before the mirror, pinning the small shirred waist until it hugged her exactly. Taking it off, she stitched the swirling taffeta pleats so they would rustle when she danced, whisper to Dane.

There was still work to be done on it Saturday morning. This had to be a perfect dress, a dream dress, a gown Dane would remember always, all the years he loved her.

Sallie replaced the pins with tiny, hidden stitches. Pushing the needle, pulling the thread, she was racing to finish it—when the door-pull rang.

Annoyed, she glanced at the old clock in the hall. It was almost noon. She didn't want to be interrupted now. Unless—it might be Dane.

She gathered up the dress, hid it behind the sofa pillows. Her heart beat with a quickening welcome as she went to the door.

It wasn't Dane. Sallie stepped forward, frowning slightly at the strange, dark-haired girl who stood there. The dark-haired girl said:

"I beg your pardon, but is Dane Coleman staying here?"

"Dane? Why—no. He was here, but he moved to the hotel."

"Oh." The girl smiled. "I'm staying there, too. Sorry to have bothered you." She hesitated. "You're Sallie Gibson, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Dane wrote me about you. . . . I'm Lolly McGill, his fiancee."

"His—" Sallie choked.

"Dane wrote me how kind you and your father had been when he hurt his leg," Lolly went on, as if she hadn't sensed the effect her words had upon Sallie.

"Is that what Dan wrote? That I was —*kind* to him?"

"Yes. I hope he didn't put you out any." Lolly sighed. "Did he tell you about me? Isn't it *too* romantic—I mean, the way Dane asked me to meet him up here so we could make it a honeymoon trip, going back to Texas together?"

The girl babbled on, but Sallie didn't hear the rest of it. The words caught in her mind, held, like a weight slowly settling down upon Sallie's heart. She heard herself say, "No—Dane didn't tell me about that."

Dimly, she realized Lolly was saying good-by, thanking her for "taking such good care of Dane for me."

Sallie nodded, mumbled something, found her way into the house. Numbly, she sank to the sofa, put her hands to her face.

But *why* had Dane pretended? Was it just to take her kisses, to make love to her, amuse himself until Lolly arrived?

Sallie was still sitting there, the torment of those questions throbbing unanswered in her mind, when the door-pull jangled again

Dane? Sallie stood. But why would Dane come to her now? Unless he hadn't expected Lolly to arrive today, didn't know the girl was in town.

Blindly, she went to the door and threw it open.

She fell back. Her mouth dropped in stunned amazement. *Oh, no! Not today! I've had enough surprises!* She looked again and felt faint. "Jess," she whispered weakly. "Jess Hunter. . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

Red is for Danger

JESS HUNTER from Texas swept through the door, caught Sallie swiftly in his arms, kissed her before she could recover her senses. In a daze, Sallie struggled free. "You can't be *here*. You—"

"I am." Jess laughed. He reached for her again. "Sallie, darling—"

"No! Jess—" She backed from him. "You said good-by. You went away. You can't—"

"Got in a card game in Los Alamos and they took my stake. I figured I might as well tail back to Goddard. Plenty of odd jobs around her for a man to pick up a little money. And besides—" he winked —"you were here."

"Jess, stop! Now, listen to me." Sallie tried to get her breath. "You can't just walk back into my life this way. We said a lot of things we didn't mean. We—"

"And we had fun," he said. "What's the matter, Sallie? Aren't you glad to see me?"

"It's different now. I—"

"Different? You mean, there's somebody else? As soon as I left, you picked up with somebody else?"

"It wasn't like that. Not just 'somebody else', Jess." Sallie stopped. *Was* it different? Dane would say good-by, too. He would take Lolly back to Texas. It was dif*ferent with me, but not with Dane. I mean no more to Dane than I mean to Jess.*

Jess was frowning, wondering. "I sort of figured you might go to the dance with me tonight, Sallie."

"I have a date for the dance." But Dane wouldn't take her, now Lolly was here.

"You can break it and go with me."

Sallie shook her head. She looked at Jess and wondered how she ever had played at being in love with him. How could she have imagined that? She had let Jess kiss her. She had sighed over him and she had hoped he wouldn't go back to Texas. Seeing him again, Sallie realized how very little Jess had really meant to her, how unimportant her whole life had been before she met Dane .

"It's not just a date, Jess. It's—everything. I love him."

Her own words seemed to fill the room, echoing back to Sallie as she tried to make Jess understand. *"I love him."*

Yes, she did love Dane. Even now, when she knew about Lolly. When she knew Dane had lied to her. And when he left Goddard to take Lolly back to Texas, she would go on loving Dane. Always and forever. She loved Dane all the way.

Sallie remembered what Dane had told her: *"I did think I was in love with Lolly, yes. Before I met you."*

Jess was saying something. Sallie had almost forgotten he was still here. "I won't give you up to somebody else without a fight," Jess was saying.

"Oh, Jess, don't be silly. You know you don't mean—" Sallie checked the words.

Slowly, she smiled. Her head lifted and there was a bright blue flame in her eyes. "I won't give up without a fight, either!" she said.

"Huh?"

"Not you, Jess. I wasn't talking about you." She took his arm, hurried him to the door. "Good-by and—thanks!"

"Thanks?"

"You wouldn't understand." She smiled again. "Run along, Jess. There are plenty of other Kansas girls in the mood for fun. I have something else to do." Sallie shut the door.

Quickly, she pulled the red dress from beneath the sofa pillows. She ran to her room. Her fingers flew at the hooks as she shucked her clothes.

Sallie lifted her arms, slipped the whispering red taffeta over her head, smoothed it into place. Wisking the comb through her hair, she decided against a hat.

It wasn't a daytime dress. Proper enough for a dance, but not the kind of dress a girl like Sallie would wear in Goddard while the sun was still up. She drew plenty of attention when she swung down the plank walk toward the hotel. Men stared and grinned and a few of them whistled.

Sallie kept her smile to herself as she strode into the hotel lobby. The clerk gawked at her as she asked, "What room is Dane Coleman in?"

"Number seven—top of the stairs," he answered dazedly. "But you can't—"

Sallie was already on her way up the stairs.

She gripped the knob, lifted her fist to knock on the door of Number Seven. Smiling, she dropped her hand and shoved the door open without knocking.

Dane was shaving. Stripped to the waist, he turned from the small mirror. The brush fell from his hand and thudded to the floor. "Sallie! What the—?"

"I thought I'd show you my new dress." She walked all the way into the room, turned in front of him. "Like it, Dane? I made it for the dance tonight."

He caught her arm. "What goes on, Sallie?"

"Oh, don't be prim, Dane." Sallie's laugh was high, loud. Loud enough to disturb the whole floor.

He wiped the lather from his face, reached for his shirt. "Now, if you'll please tell me what—?"

Dane was buttoning his shirt when the door slammed open. The hotel clerk stood there, hands on his hips. He jerked his head at Sallie. "Come on, baby—out!"

Sallie stiffened. "I certainly will not get out!"

"No?" The clerk walked toward her. "Look—this is a nice, quiet hotel. We don't want trouble. But if you're asking for it—"

"Now, just a minute." Dane stepped up to the hotel clerk. "You've got it all wrong. . . . You can't talk to Sallie as if she—"

"I'm tellin' both of you!" The clerk grabbed Sallie's arm.

Dane's fist banged to the clerk's jaw. The clerk staggered back, yelled for help at the top of his lungs.

THERE was a young riot outside the door. Everybody in the hotel crowded along the corridor and up the stairs. With a smile wide across her face, Sallie watched the growing mob. She saw the dark-haired girl push through the others to stand at the door.

Sallie moved between Dane and the clerk. "This is all a mistake," she said sweetly. "I was just showing my new dress to my fiance. I don't know what all the fuss—"

"Well!" Lolly drew herself up, stared at Dane as if her eyes had frozen over. "Well!" Lolly huffed around, pushed back into the corridor.

Sallie listened to the girl's heels tap down the hall like they were driving nails into somebody's coffin. Sallie turned to Dane with an innocent look. "Maybe we had better talk outside, Dane."

He took her arm, led Sallie through the mob, down the stairs.

Dane marched her back along the plank walk to her house. A little grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "If your father doesn't whale the daylights out of you for this crazy stunt, I will."

"But, Dane, I just wanted to show you my dress. Don't you like it?"

He looked at her, not the dress. "Suppose you start telling me the truth."

"All right—" Sallie tossed her head—"I will. . . . I love you, see! And I'm not going to let you marry Lolly!"

"Lolly? How did *you* know that she was in town?"

"She came to the house. She told me how you wrote her to meet you here, so you could take her back to Texas! Well, you won't marry her!" She grinned impishly up at him. "And I don't think she'll want you—now. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"That's why you—" Dane laughed softly His laughter grew until he shook with it. "You put on that show so she would—"

"All right! Go ahead and laugh at me!" Sallie swung around. She raced up the steps and slammed the door. Inside, she started to cry.

"Sallie!" Dane pounded on the door.

"G-go away! Go to—her!"

"Sallie!" He rattled the knob. "Listen to me, will you?"

"No! Don't say you're sorry! Don't try to pity me! I don't need your—" She stopped and listened.

Dane didn't answer. She heard his boots go down the steps. She had fought for him and she had lost.

Sallie started to cry all over again. Dane had laughed at her. He would tell Lolly and they would laugh together. They would laugh at Sallie all the way to Texas.

A hand touched her shoulder. Sallie jumped like a startled cat, whirled around. Dane's arms caught her, held her. "Sallie, darling. . . ."

"But how—"

He kissed her and for a long minute he didn't say anything at all. Finally he said, "I came through the window. You forgot about that." Dane smiled, wiped her tears with his big, gentle fingers. "You poor kid." His mouth tightened an instant. "It's like Lolly to come here and lie to you. I should have guessed she would try something like that."

"You mean—"

"I wrote her, like I told you, that I was through with her. She came to Goddard to try to make me change my mind." Dane pulled Sallie even closer. "As if I *could* change my mind about you. . . . I told her off this morning—told Lolly she'd better keep her bags packed and take the next train home."

"Oh, Dane— I just couldn't let you go."

"I'm not. I'm staying here to work with your father. We talked it over and he thinks he can use me."

Sallie's eyes were filled as she looked up at Dane, but she was smiling. "I can use you, too, "she said softly. Her smile teased him lovingly.

"I figured that. I was going to ask you tonight at the dance if you'd—"

Sallie didn't let him finish. "Yes, Dane," she said, "I'll marry you."

"Whew!" He grinned "These Kansas girls!" He took her more snugly into his arms. "They're just what a Texas man wants—for keeps."

THE END

Wandering Heart

By Marion Trow

My heart was as wild as a stallion
That has made the prairie its home;
My heart, like a pirate galleon,
Seemed destined the wide world to roam.

But my wild, erring heart has gentled;
Your noose is settled and taut,
And never again will it wander,
For my heart has found what it sought!

Pin-Up Girl

Some roadside Romeo is sure to read
The high-sign of this lush dream;
Whether he slows down or picks up
speed—

.....

To finish the limerick in this January contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this January contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on December 26th, 1946. The judges' decision will be final. . . . See announcement of winner of October contest on page 98.

ONE LESSON FROM LUSCIOUS LAURIE

♥ By Diane Austin ♥

Mistaken for a honkatonk dancer because she didn't look like a horse-faced schoolmarm, lovely Laurie decided to give handsome Len White and notorious Mack Trimble a lesson they'd never forget.

ONE minute Laurie Drew was standing on a deserted station platform, gazing wistfully after the speck of a train from which she had just alighted. The next, she was being gathered up in a pair of strong, masculine arms, and being kissed—expertly and thoroughly. It was none the less satisfying and exciting for the fact that Laurie had not the slightest idea who was doing the kissing.

When her mouth was at last disengaged, to her amazement, she could not find the words with which to protest, nor, to her shocked confusion, could she find the desire to do so. Shakenly, one hand went up to right the bonnet on her tumbled curls, while she openly stared at this right friendly-acting stranger.

All too plainly, he returned her interest. And he had the kind of bold, twinkling eyes that easily triumphed over Laurie's own saucer-round blue gaze. His face was lean, with likably regular features and unruly dark hair. A face—a man, Laurie silently amended, who went well with this rugged country she was seeing for the first time.

"Welcome to Aurora," he drawled, his eyes never dropping their nonchalant surveyal.

Slowly, a flush crept into Laurie's round cheeks. "Thank you," she murmured, with a coolness she did not feel. "Do you always greet people this—this way?"

He grinned. "Only when they look like you," he said admiringly. "And no one's been that pretty before. You're the dancer for Mack Trimble's place, aren't you?"

"I b-beg your pardon?" Laurie stammered bewilderedly.

"Maybe I'd better present myself first—formally, I mean," he added with a wink. "I'm Len Martin, owner, editor and staff of the Aurora *Press*. Things've been kind of peaceful round here lately, so I appointed myself a one-man welcomin' committee to come down to the station and—Hey!" he broke off excitedly.

"What's the matter?" Laurie demanded, as he looked wildly around the platform.

"I sure as shootin' forgot about her!"

By now Laurie wasn't so convinced she wasn't in the company of a madman. She said slowly, "You forgot—about whom?"

"The schoolmarm, of course," Len told her, and then, noticing her puzzled look, smiled warmly. "Don't know why in tarnation I'm getting so het up about it. She'll most likely be on tomorrow's train. All the teachin' women I've had the bad luck to meet, never did know whether they were comin' or goin'."

With difficulty Laurie controlled the hot torrent of angry words that rose to her mind. "Are you sure this—this schoolmarm *didn't* get off today's train?" she asked carefully.

"Lovely," Len drawled, "I've got eyes. And these eyes tell me you're the new dancer Mack Trimble sent for from Chicago. No one else got off with you?"

"No."

"You didn't notice any bookish-lookin', straight-laced old buzzard on the train, did you?"

Inwardly, Laurie winced. "No," she said again truthfully.

"Then she didn't get here yet," Len finished. "And, Lovely, for my part, she need never come."

Laurie thought of the second-hand set of history books, the Teachers Handy Guide, and the dark skirts and white shirtwaists,

Len said calmly: "Nothing wrong with the *Press* welcoming your new entertainer, is there?"

so carefully packed away in her carpetbag. So this Len Martin thought all schoolmarms were either fools or "buzzards," did he? So he thought they were all at least half a century old, and just about looked it. Well, she'd show him good and different!

Her eyes danced like two blue imps of laughter, her lips curved, softly, invitingly, as she flung back her head and turned on what she hoped was her most radiant, beguiling smile.

Len swore beneath his breath. "Let's try that welcome once again," he said huskily.

Once more he drew her close and his lips found hers in a blazing kiss that sent her heart flying into space, and back again, rocking unsteadily. Tremulous in his arms, Laurie forgot about wanting to give him his come-uppance, forgot everything but that here was the romantic adventure she had traveled hundreds of dusty miles to find. She was a flame aglow, when before she had been without a spark. She was alive and vibrant with life, when before she had been dead.

"Lovely," Len breathed, "you're dynamite."

"She happens to be *my* dynamite, Martin," a voice suddenly rang out from somewhere behind her.

Laurie found herself being released, and opened her eyes dazedly. Leaning against the stationmaster's window regarding them with unveiled scorn, was a tall, garishly-attired man.

"I might have known you'd be the first to stick your nose where it didn't belong," the newcomer went on to Len Martin. "I suggest you take it—along with the rest of you—away. Pronto!"

"Hold on there, Trimble," Len said calmly. "Nothing wrong with the *Press* welcoming your new entertainer, is there?"

The other man squinted at Laurie. His cheeks were florid, and his little blond mustache seemed to be bristling with excitement. "I'll let it go this time," he said. "But from now on, I'll be seeing that Miss—Miss—"

"Drew—Laurie Drew," Laurie supplied mechanically.

"—that Miss Drew sticks strictly to business," the owner of the blond mustache finished.

LEN ignored him. "Laurie," he said, lightly taking her arm, "as you may have suspected from the noises he's been makin', this here is Mack Trimble, owner of the Golden Nugget Cafe—and your new boss."

Laurie could only stand there, speechless, as Len's words rushed tauntingly back to her. *All the teachin' women—never did know whether they were comin' or goin'.* At this dreadful moment, they certainly held true for her.

Mack Trimble said to Laurie, "Ever since my brother wrote me about you, Miss Laurie, I've been more than eagerly awaiting your arrival."

Now was the time to tell them, Laurie knew. Before this mixup went any further, she must tell them that *she* was the schoolmarm—that it was the dancer who had not yet arrived. Len would understand when she explained to him—she hoped. And Mr. Mack Trimble would be just as satisfied with the real entertainer.

She opened her mouth to begin, and then shut it again. Because both men were regarding her minutely, their eyes so frankly intent on her, that she almost wished they *were* seeing a straight-laced old buzzard, instead of a slim girl, with the vibrant face and figure that had made the school board back in her home town, suggest that she seek elsewhere for employment.

Len's voice, warm with admiration, broke into her thoughts: "Your brother sure can pick 'em, Trimble. This one's—luscious."

"Hmmm," Trimble agreed. "You've given me an idea. What do you think of featurin' her Luscious Laurie. I'll take a half page ad in tomorrow's *Press* on the strength of that."

This can't be me they're talking about, Laurie told herself wildly. *I've never been in Chicago. I've never even been in an entertainment place. I've got to tell them before—*

But now, each man had her by the arm, and they were propelling her toward a buckboard hitched up at the farther end of the platform.

Len was saying, "The new teacher wasn't on the train."

Mack Trimble shrugged. "One less horse-faced schoolmarm ain't gonna hurt

this town none." He assisted a wordless Laurie up to her seat, then got in beside her.

Len took his place on the other side, and picked up the reins. "Folks on the outlyin' ranches have been kind of countin' on her, though," he said reflectively. "They've gone and built a new schoolroom, out near my place."

"She'll show up," Mack Trimble said shortly. "Come on. Let's get goin'."

Laurie sat stiff and upright between the two men all the way into town, barely nodding her head as each one addressed her in turn. *Horse-faced schoolmarm, indeed,* she thought. It looked as if the ranch children weren't the only ones in these parts who needed to be taught a thing or two.

Back in Ohio, Laurie hadn't minded too much when the school board had given the local appointment to the other candidate, an older, more experienced woman who would fit in with the town's rather narrow-minded standards of how a teacher should look and behave. It gave her the chance she had been waiting for, to cut loose from the old ties and find a more exciting fortune elsewhere.

She had seen the ad in a newspaper. A group of Aurora ranchers needed a teacher for their children. Laurie had written and been accepted, and had eagerly started out on what promised to be a different kind of adventure. Well, it had certainly turned out to be different.

Right then and there, Laurie decided she would take her own sweet time about explaining the mistake. And then Mack Trimble—and especially that Len Martin—could stew in their own embarrassment. Meanwhile, she could play at being Luscious Laurie—too luscious for *their* good, she'd see to it.

THE buckboard pulled up before the hotel. Across the street, Laurie could see the gilt-lettered windows and hear the sounds of merriment, which proclaimed the establishment to be the Golden Nugget Café. She shuddered, and for the fraction of a second, her newly-made resolution wavered in her mind.

But again, both men were assisting her down, and steering her inside toward the desk.

Mack Trimble said, "Your costume trunk's already here. I had them put it in your dressin' room. Get a good night's rest, and be over for rehearsal in the afternoon." He turned to Len. "You be sure to write me a good ad, Martin." He nodded curtly to the both of them, and left.

Laurie watched the honkatonk owner disappear through the door. Her blue eyes were troubled as she turned to Len.

"Len," she began uncertainly, "I think I'd better—"

The young editor curved his hand around her chin, and raised it so that she could meet his dark gaze. "Remember what your boss told us?" he said coldly. "You're sticking strictly to business. You may be dynamite to me, Lovely, but I'm not the one who's gonna set it off."

With that he turned and went out, leaving Laurie to her forlorn and unhappy thoughts.

"Things'll look different tomorrow," she promised herself, as she followed the hotel keeper up to her rooms.

But the next day, the only difference that Laurie could see was that everything looked twice as bad. She had wanted to give Len and Mack Trimble a bitter dose of their own medicine, but so far, all she had managed to do was dig herself deeper into an uncomfortable situation. There just had to be some way out, that didn't call for any more of this cheating and lying.

She worried away the morning, pacing up and down the small parlor, but by afternoon could think of no better solution to her problem than to go over to the honkatonk for what Mack Trimble had called "rehearsal."

Downstairs, the smirking hotel keeper handed her a folded newspaper. "That's some write-up Len Martin gave you," he told her. "I'll be over to the Golden Nugget myself tonight—to see you in action."

Laurie read the boldly displayed ad, her cheeks flaming with every printed word. So that's what he really thought of her! And she had crazily hoped, there in his arms, that it was the beginning of something lasting and lovely between them.

Determinedly she crushed the paper in her hand, and swept out of the hotel, making an angry beeline for the café across the street.

Inside the honkatonk, a tobacco-chewing,

wizened old man was effortlessly pushing a broom around the cluttered floor. He eyed Laurie speculatively, then went back to his unhurried task.

"Could I see Mr. Trimble, please?" Laurie asked him.

"Mebbe," the old-timer said tonelessly. "You the new dancin' gal?"

Laurie nodded her head miserably. "Yes." It was the easiest way out for the moment.

"Too skinny," the café helper said. But the broom clattered to the floor, and he led the way to the side of the hall and up a narrow flight of stairs.

Laurie followed him into an empty dressing room. "This isn't—" she began.

"Boss says—get into costume first." His eyes shifted to the trunk standing beside the ornate screen. "Office is across the hall."

Before she could reply, he had shuffled out.

Laurie looked helplessly around the tiny room. Maybe it would make things less troublesome for her, if she did as she was told, and then explained to Mack Trimble. She went over to the trunk and lifted the heavy lid. Vivid colors and glittering materials met her eye.

She pulled out a few costumes, wincing at their brevity, and finally chose the least flamboyant of them. It was a black plumed gown, baring her shoulders. Laurie got into it swiftly, wondering whether she would ever see a school-room again—and if so, how she would face the children.

When she saw herself in the mirror, looking nearly as brazen as she had been described in the ad, she hastily wrapped a kimona around her. Now to see Mack Trimble and end this farce once and for all.

She knocked on the door across the hall. The door was opened so suddenly, she almost fell across the threshold.

"Well, well," Mack Trimble said, rubbing his pudgy hands together. "The Luscious Laurie—at last. Come in, won't you?"

Laurie entered a little ways, and took a deep breath. "I think there's something you ought to know, Mr. Trimble," she said.

Mack Trimble's eyes narrowed menacingly. "Okay, Sister," he said darkly. "What's your game?"

Laurie couldn't believe she had heard right. "My—game?" she faltered.

"Sure," he said. "My brother wrote me plain as day he was sendin' me a redhead. With that yellow hair, you're no more the girl he mentioned than the moon is made out of blue cheeze. Come on. What's the setup?"

"There's no 'setup,'" Laurie replied coldly. "It's all been a mistake."

The café owner came closer. "I'll say there's been a mistake," he agreed. "And you're the one who made it. But—" his thin mouth tightened "—I'm willin' to overlook it."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. I happen to like you, see? You act sweet to me and I'll never let on like anything's wrong." He came still closer. "You won't even have to dance, see?"

"No," Laurie said wildly, by now thoroughly frightened at this unexpected turn the matter had taken. "I'm not staying here. You can't make me."

"Oh, can't I?" Suddenly, he reached out and grabbed her wrist. "You're stayin' all right." His other arm was pressed around her waist, and the little blond mustache was descending to her mouth.

Laurie struggled to be free from his vise-like grip, but she only succeeded in turning her head, so that his kiss fell on the side of her face.

"You little devil," he said hoarsely, and pulled her to him again.

A voice from the doorway asked, "Is this the business Luscious Laurie is supposed to be sticking to?"

Mack Trimble dropped his arms, and Laurie turned to meet Len Martin's accusing eyes.

"What do you want here, Martin?" the honkatonk man demanded.

"Nothing—now," Len said slowly, and Laurie cringed before the icy words.

"I thought maybe I'd write some copy on Miss Laurie's—rehearsal," Len went on, eyeing her kimona, "but I reckon this one here's not for publication."

"You reckon right," Mack Trimble said. "Supposin' you drop around tonight, instead. The *Press* is always good for a table down front."

Laurie was spared whatever reply Len might make, by the appearance in the doorway of the tobacco-chewing helper.

"Lady downstairs to see you, Boss," he announced glumly.

MACK TRIMBLE glanced at Len, but the newspaper man appeared to be steadfastly regarding the antics of a fly on the opposite wall. "I'll be back pronto," Trimble said, and strode from the room.

When they were alone, Laurie turned desperately to Len. "Please," she said. "You must listen to me. It isn't what you think."

"Why should it matter what I think?" he asked.

"That's right," Laurie said bitterly. "You've got eyes, haven't you?"

He swore softly. "Lovely," he said, "I've got a little speech to make. And after I make it, you and I are riding different trails. A cow-country editor like me has no business foolin' around Mack Trimble's girl. Yesterday I thought—well, I thought you were just a scared, sweet kid and didn't know exactly what you were in for when you came to this place. I tried to show you in that durn-fool ad. And then when it set you straight on this place, I was loco enough to hope that you'd give it all up—for me." He wagged his head. "Reckon I was paddlin' my canoe up the wrong river."

"No," she whispered. "No."

Roughly he pulled her into his arms. "Just this once more," he said. "Then let your kisses fall where they may."

It was the third time he had kissed her, and at once it was the most wonderful and the most terrible. All the hurt and disappointment he must be feeling was branded onto her lips, along with the love he might have had for her. It was all ecstasy and bliss, interlaced with pain and heartbreak.

He let her go suddenly. "Well, Luscious Laurie—here's forgettin' you."

"Len—wait!" Laurie called after him.

He stopped short at the door. But when Laurie hurried over to him, she saw that it was not on her account that he had stopped. Mack Trimble was blocking the way. Beside him was a breathless, plump redhead. With a sickening lurch of her heart, Laurie knew who she must be.

"That's her!" the plump redhead exclaimed. "She's wearin' my kimona. That's the lyin' imposter!"

Mack Trimble lit a cigar and said nothing.

Len looked helplessly from one girl to another. "What's she talkin' about?" he demanded.

Laurie seemed to be rooted to the spot, as the redhead glared at her. The redhead said loudly:

"I'm talkin' about my rights, that's what. Mr. Trimble told me about this job in Chicago. And now that I've come all the way out to this flea-bitten country, I'm not lettin' any milk-faced blonde put one over on me."

(Please continue on page 96)

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MA'AM, YOU'RE JEALOUS!

Tamsen couldn't forgive handsome Dave Melton for running a saloon — and hiring a curvaceous blonde to work in it.

AS TAMSEN BRENT tooled the heavy hay wagon toward the unloading ramp of the Miners' Supply Company, her damp plaid shirt pulled tight and smooth. A whistle from the direction of the Free Lunch Saloon brought angry warmth to her cheeks, making her even prettier under her wide-brimmed hat.

No matter how much she wanted to look like a tousled boy when she brought in a load of the wild hay she was cutting herself, some hombre hanging around Dave Melton's Free Lunch Saloon let her know that denim pants and a thick shirt could not hide young curves.

The saloon owned by the man she had almost loved was like a cactus needle in her flesh. Through the front window that flanked the bat wing doors, she could see the golden splash of Dot Morgan's hair behind the big copper soup kettle. If she looked hard, she was sure she would see Pete, Tamsen's twenty-year-old brother, somewhere in Dot's vicinity.

"The yellow-haired hussy!" she thought violently.

The free lunch counter with a beautiful blonde girl in attendance was an innovation in Smeltertown that meant pay dirt for Dave. To Tamsen it might mean ruin. Pete spent most of his time there now, instead of helping her harvest the wild hay on their Bar B ranch. This year hay sold to the mines was bringing two hundred dollars a ton. But cutting, raking, and baling a ton of hay alone was hard work for a girl.

Tamsen jumped down from the seat, went around to the rear of the wagon, and tugged angrily at the tail-gate chain. She was so occupied with thinking up new names to call Dot Morgan and her boss that she did not notice the bat wings across the street swing open and a tall young man in a wide-brimmed Stetson come out and hurry over to her.

"Let me do that," said a deep-toned voice at her shoulder.

She jumped, swallowed the breath that jammed in her throat, and glared at him.

"Get back to your fancy-pants saloon, Dave Melton," she snapped.

The high-color in her sun-gilded cheeks made her as pretty as an Indian peach. He stood looking down at her, a lazy smile spreading slowly in his face until it twinkled in his grey eyes—questioning eyes whose level gaze probed hers quietly.

"You really hate me, don't you?" he drawled good-naturedly.

Why did he have to look so clean and wholesome, she thought resentfully, as though he spent every waking hour in the sun. She had never seen him without his broad-brimmed hat. A barkeeper in a rancher's hat!

The ripe-fruit contours of her mouth firmed. "I don't hate you. I just despise you—you and your saloon and—"

She bit off the word. To herself she could call Dot Morgan a yellow-haired hussy, but it wouldn't do at all to talk about her out loud. Criticising a blonde just made the men like her all the more.

The smile went out of his eyes, leaving them like cold, dead steel.

"The saloon enabled me to buy that ranch I wanted. The money I'm making here will buy the finest draught horses in the West. You ought to understand."

He paused briefly before going on, and the steel went out of his eyes again. "Remember that day last April, when you and I talked about how we'd make this gold strike pay off for us without mucking or breaking hard rock?"

Remember?

For months, in spite of herself, she had

By Sophie Ellis

She thought: *I'm making him want to kiss me.*

been recalling that warm day last spring, when Pete had gone to the blacksmith shop on the Rafter T Ranch to have a piece fabricated for the hay press they were building. She was sitting on the corral fence, thinking only of how much they were going to make on their fine wild hay, when Dave Melton rode up and asked which fork in the trail went to Smeltertown.

"Going to work in the mines?" she asked, taking in his muscle-packed shoulders and wishing that she and Pete could hire him to help them on the ranch.

"I'm starting a business in Smeltertown, Ma'am," he said. "There are better ways to make money than by digging in the mountains."

"That's exactly my idea!" she acknowledged enthusiastically. "Gold-mad people trampled the wonderful grass in this valley to get to the mountains. Next fall, hay sold at the mines will be worth as much as gold."

"Draught horses are like gold, too," he said, pausing to look with evident pleasure over the pretty Bar B spread. "I have some land spotted down the valley a piece where the grass grows up to my shoulders. The seed is better feed than oats. I can raise big Percherons for freighting out ore and hauling in supplies."

THEY did not speak for a long time, yet the silence was an interlude of growing friendship. When they looked at each other, they were both conscious of their companionship and thinking of the fun they were going to have in finding out more about each other.

"Come see our home-made irrigation dam we have just finished," Tamsen invited. "It will let water seep over the grass in the dry season and make the hay thicker and higher. That will save a lot of work at harvest time, you know."

Together they went to inspect the dam and the floodgates that controlled the waters of Willow Creek The new grass was beginning to green out. Bluets lifted delicate flower-faces to the yellow sunlight, and an early lark sang overhead

She let him take her hand and swing it as they walked along. The warmth of his long palm drove into her until her veins tingled with rich excitement.

When they reached the impounded water, they stood watching a lazy trout swim just under the surface—stood shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, a strong man and a strong, beautiful girl conscious of the wild, sweet life surging in her young body.

The lark had followed them, drunk with spring. It soared into the blue, a dark streak of singing ecstasy. Tamsen tilted up her head to watch its flight, aware of Dave's eyes on her. She was aware, too, of the way her breath caught, and of her red mouth's humid warmth, pulsing with a sudden restlessness—a feeling of incompletion and of waiting.

She felt him stir beside her, heard the gusty sigh of his breath. Then she was in his arms, all warm and soft and yielding to the slow kiss she had wanted, her eyes still on the lark because the vast rush of feeling in her seemed to reach up and up until it merged with that soaring point of bird-music.

The kiss left both so shaken that neither knew the exact moment it ended, when they stood apart again, only their hands touching.

Hours later, lying awake in her room, she still retained that sensation of touching hands, that awareness of perfection realized.

"We'll always be touching hands," she let herself acknowledge happily, sure that he, too, knew that their lives must go on together.

Now, standing by her wagon, months later, he repeated the plea he had made the few times they had met again.

"You haven't had a pleasant word for me since you found out my business is a saloon. Owning a saloon is honorable. Men must drink, and someone has to have the stuff."

She wished he would not look at her like that, holding the long, clean length of his body so erect and proud—so much more like a man accustomed to handling horses than running a saloon. *He's your man, and you know it.* The realization was like a destroying storm in her heart. She wanted to hurt him for still having power to move her so deeply.

She said, as coolly as she could, "No one has to make his saloon so enticing that young men like Pete think a blue bottle filled with Old Monongahela and a blonde behind a free-lunch counter more important than work."

"So that's it." His grey eyes were knife-edged again as he regarded her. As though speaking to a complete stranger whom he did not like, he added, "Ma'am, you're jealous."

Turning abruptly, he crossed the street. Until the bat wings closed behind his tall form, she stared, her face white. *Ma'am, you're jealous.* Did he mean she was jealous of Dot because of himself?

She was still numb from the sting of his accusation when a soft chuckle came from the shadows just beyond the door at the head of the unloading ramp, and a voice said with delight:

"*Vaya,* Senorita!"

Pedro, the man-of-all-work around the Miners' Supply Company, came to the ramp, his white teeth flashing. Behind him loomed the vast bulk of old Pop Waring, who kept accounts for the company.

Tamsen's cheeks were hot. These two had heard her quarrel with Dave.

"Don't blush, darlin'," soothed Pop sympathetically. "You handled him right well, more's the pity."

"Are you sorry I stood up to him?" she asked crossly.

"Sure." Pop waddled down the ramp. "A gal can't be too independent when she has a big hay harvest on her hands, with no one to help her out but the fellow she cusses every time they meet."

"You mean—Dave Melton could help me?"

"He could find twenty men in twenty minutes to help you. Practically every man in the country drinks at his saloon. Ask him to help you find some harvest hands."

"I'd see the hay rot first," she retorted angrily.

Pop tutted sadly behind his teeth as he regarded her over his spectacles. "Don't you know men better'n that, darlin'? A woman never gets far with a man 'til he does somethin' for her. Now, you take that yaller-haired gal behind his lunch counter."

Every nerve in Tamsen's body waited for him to go on, but he paused a long time over his records before explaining.

"Guess you know Dot Morgan was stranded here when that carnival she was with busted up," he said at last. "Dave helped her out with a job, and now she's helpin' Dave to make a fortune."

Tamsen sniffed. "She's trying to rope him."

"Dot doesn't have to try to rope any man." Pop pointed. "Look-a there."

Tamsen looked, and what she saw made her blood sizzle. Pete, apparently slightly drunk, was trying to kiss Dot. The blond girl's hair foamed loose from its pinnings as she struggled with him. The grinning faces of several customers were also visible in the oblong of window glass.

SUDDENLY Dave appeared in the little space framed by the window. His hand shot forward, seized Pete, and pulled him from the girl. For a brief interlude the three disappeared from view. Then the bat wings flapped out violently, and the two fighting men stampeded out to the board walk, exchanging blows. Pete slugged at Dave's face, his fist glancing from the broad brim of Dave's hat, sending the cream-colored Stetson spinning into the street.

The blood roared in Tamsen's head. Dave had bounced her brother because of Dot.

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Leaving her horses unattended at the ramp, she ran across the street.

The two men were evenly matched. Both were tall, muscular, and as enraged as bulls. Customers poured from the Free Lunch to watch, and Dot came with them. Her hair was completely down now, reaching nearly to her waist in a thick, bright cascade that outlined luscious curves sheathed in bright blue.

"Oh, can't we do something?" she cried, running over to Tamsen.

Tamsen stepped back, saying coldly, "You got them into this."

"I can't help it if they both—like me," Dot said petulantly.

She retreated to the fringe of the crowd in the street, her blue dress a splash of color against the dark bulk of the hay wagon backed up to the ramp.

The crowd of onlookers was excited now. To a man they cheered for Dave. Tamsen recognized the loudest. He was a fat, red-bearded man whom everyone called Stuffy because he liked good food even more than beer. Many a time she had glimpsed him through the window of the Free Lunch, gorging himself on sausage sandwiches.

"Bust his nose, Dave!" he yelled.

Tamsen squirmed through the crowd until she stood on the edge of the cleared space where the two men fought.

"Attaboy, Pete!" she yelled. "Hit him for me!"

Pete's fist smacked against Dave's middle with a thud that could be heard clearly above the babble in the street. Dave reeled back. The look of pain on his face made Tamsen wince, but she squealed with apparent triumph.

"Again, Pete!" she encouraged.

But Pete's intended blow did not land. Sudden, new clamor broke out—the thunder of stampeding, iron-shod hoofs, the rattle of chains, and the rumble of mighty wheels jerked crazily.

"The horses!" someone screamed.

A woman's high-pitched cry shrilled out and pinched off abruptly. Tamsen tried to fling herself through the crowd, but was hemmed in by a wall of humanity trying to escape from the runaway horses hitched to the big hay wagon.

Through a brief break in the mob, Tamsen glimpsed her team tearing down the street, the half empty wagon pitching as more of its load was dumped into the street. But she was not looking at the runaways now. Her horrified eyes had glimpsed a blue heap close to where the horses had stood.

Pete was the first to reach Dot, yet Dave was close behind. Dave slipped an arm around the girl's bright head and lifted it from the dust.

Dot moaned and clamped a hand to one of her eyes.

"She wasn't run over," Stuffy said. "The tail-gate chain sorta swung out and smacked her in the face."

"Are you hurt badly, Dot?" Dave asked.

Dot's uncovered blue eye rolled up to him appealingly.

"My eye hurts," she said, her lips quivering. "Look, Dave. Is it going to be black?"

She removed her hand, revealing a bruise on the flesh under the eye.

"Afraid so, honey," he said gently. "You're going to have a bad black eye."

"Good!" Tamsen said. "I mean—it's good she wasn't hurt any worse." She swallowed hard before adding. "Let her up, Dave, and see if she's all right."

Dave helped the girl to her feet, but Dot still sagged against him, her little hands clutching for his arm.

"I'm too shaken up to walk," she said plaintively.

"I'll carry you to your room, honey," Dave offered.

Pete took the girl's other arm. He had been a little battered in the fight. His lower lip was cut.

"Let me carry you, Dot," he urged.

"Don't you two start fighting over me again," Dot pouted, looking at Tamsen with triumph in her blue eyes.

Tamsen confronted Pete. "Let Dave attend to Dot. I'll go with them. You see about the horses, Pete. Look. Someone has stopped them."

Far down the street another crowd had formed about the wagon. Pete went reluctantly toward it.

TAMSEN found Dave's hat where it still lay on the ground. She picked it up, catching a faint, masculine aroma of tobacco and barber shop hair tonic. Her heart quickened suddenly. She

jammed the hat on his head, receiving a short "Thanks."

Following behind, she was sure he enjoyed toting Dot, whose flowing hair kept blowing into his face.

A woman never gets very far with a man until he does something for her. Pop Waring had said a mouthful then. Dave was really doing something for Dot now.

Dave had to walk to the end of the block to Mrs. Paxton's boarding house, and then carry his burden up the stairs to the second floor. When he deposited Dot carefully on the bed, the girl closed her eyes and succeeded in looking weak and very attractive.

"I'd better get the doctor," Dave said uneasily.

Mrs. Paxton had come up behind then. She looked calculatingly at Dot, her hands on her broad hips.

"Reckon she don't need anything but some beefsteak for that eye," she said. "I'll fetch her some."

"But I'm nervous—and—and scared!" Dot wailed.

Dave looked worried. "Could you stay with her tonight, Tamsen?" he asked.

"I was going to suggest that," Tamsen lied. "My hay crop will be ruined, any way. I won't even have a team and wagon now, most likely."

A warm flicker seemed to pass over Dave's eyes, as though her troubles touched him.

It was Dot who spoke again. "I can't go to work with a black eye. Your runaway caused it, Tamsen. Couldn't you take over my job for a day or two?"

"Your job at the lunch counter?" Tamsen's heart was like a shrunken knot. She looked at Dave, and caught an amused look in his eyes. A challenging look. "I'll do it," she said.

Dave went to the door and gestured for her to come into the hall.

"I don't want Mrs. Paxton listening to all our business," he said. He paused before going on. "Are you really offering to work in that disreputable saloon of mine?"

"Not if you don't want me," she said a little hotly. "I'm helping Dot out. And I promise I won't poison your customers."

He grinned and pushed his hat back. "Right sure?"

"And I won't start trouble by getting your customers—to kiss me."

There was enough light in the dingy hall for her to see the clean line of his jaw harden.

"So you really believe Dot made Pete kiss her?"

"Yes."

He stood looking at her, his eyes long and narrowed and flaming as torches in still air. She drew up her chin.

"Maybe you're right," he said softly, taking one step forward, his blazing eyes devouring her.

Every nerve in her body leaped to awareness. Her flesh throbbed with the wash of her blood. *I'm making him want to kiss me,* she thought. With all her strength she tried to guard herself against what she knew was coming, but the fury of her beating fists could not stop him when he took her into his arms. His kiss was a violent, almost brutal conquest of her rebellious lips. His mouth bruised her flesh and stopped her breath, took the life from her until she seemed suspended in his conquering strength—drowned in ecstasy from which she could not escape.

He let her go so suddenly she nearly fell.

"Beast!" she gasped, slapping his face with a loud smack.

He grabbed her hands, holding both in one of his. "Don't make me do it again," he warned, laughing softly.

He dropped her hands suddenly and turned to the stairs. Without looking back, he ran down toward the street door.

It took a long moment for her to quell the tumult boiling inside. "I'll get even," she vowed.

Suddenly her smoky eyes widened in thought. "By golly! I can get even. Tomorrow."

PURPOSE was in the lift of her head as she hurried down to the street to find Pete. He was in front of the wheelwright's shop. The wagon had been badly damaged, and repairs would have to be made before it could be used again.

"Don't worry about the hay, Sis," Pete said. "I'm going to ride out home tonight. I'll have another load or two ready by the time you bring in the wagon."

He spoke from the corner of badly swollen lips. But he had received another injury that was not physical. Tamsen's

heart went out to him when she saw the unguarded misery of a boy of twenty in his brown eyes.

"You like Dot a lot, don't you?" she asked, laying her hand on his arm.

"A man doesn't just like Dot." A bitter tone was in his voice. "He's either crazy over her or he hates her. I wish I could hate her."

He thrust his hands into the pocket of his tight denim pants and strolled into the shop, so concerned with his own unhappiness that he did not notice the moisture in his sister's eyes.

Tamsen went back to Dot's room, determined to give Dot a piece of her mind for what she had done to Pete. The girl was asleep, one round, white arm curled around her bright head.

She looked more like a sweet kid of seventeen than a designing female playing two men against each other. It was easy to see why Pete was so crazy over her. Tamsen's lips trembled. It was also easy to see why Dave wanted Dot.

Ma'am, you're jealous. The taunt still cut her like a whiplash. Now she had a second reason for wanting to punish him. *That kiss.*

The next morning, wearing one of Dot's blue dresses, she started for the saloon to do Dot's work. For months she had worn nothing but jeans. Now the swish of the soft cloth around her legs and the feel of the little round collar under her chin were pleasant.

The street was full of men. The smelter was not operating because of a breakdown in machinery. That meant more men would drink in the saloons today.

When Tamsen pushed open the bat wings of the Free Lunch, her heart lurched. But when she saw the interior, her courage returned. The saloon did not seem much different from the cafes she had seen, except for a bright cleanliness that no eating place in Smeltertown had. Chip Boswell, the bartender, was doing some cleaning now.

"Go right on to the kitchen," he said. "Dave told me to start you making soup and sandwiches from the fresh stuff he brought in before leavin' this mornin'."

"He won't be here today?"

"Not 'til late."

So Dave didn't want another meeting with her. She stood watching Chip polish the large back bar mirror with a towel. It was the handsomest mirror she had ever seen. When he finished he reached under the lunch counter for a whiskey bottle filled with liquid lye soap and began scrubbing the counter top.

"He has a nice place here," she said, glancing around shyly.

"Mighty nice place. Runs it clean, too. The lunch counter, with a respectable girl waitin' on customers, gives a high-toned air."

She could not resist one little jibe. "He doesn't run that free lunch counter for his health. The customers drink more when they have those sandwiches to eat."

"You don't see many free-lunch outfits in the big towns serve hot soup," Chip said. "A bowl of hot soup discourages too much drinking. Dave don't want too much drinking around here."

"I don't believe that," she said shortly.

"But it's true." He shoved the soap bottle under the counter again. "There's never been a rough house here. Dave bounces anyone who tries to start trouble."

There's never been a rough house here. She smiled as she went back to the kitchen. A good fight would practically wreck a saloon. She had passed the Gopher Hole Saloon a few hours after a fight between the riders of two warring ranches. An explosion could not have caused more damage.

It ought not be hard for a pretty girl to get a fight started, even in Dave's fancy-pants saloon.

As she thoughtfully diced root vegetables and beef for the soup, she observed the men who came in to drink. They were not the reprobates she had expected to find here. Starting a fight wouldn't be easy. She would have to use her head.

When she went behind the lunch counter to pass out hot soup and sandwiches, her face was rosy from the warm kitchen. Business around the big copper kettle boomed immediately.

"Best soup I ever tasted," declared Sam Roper, who had worked for her and Pete before the mines had lured him away.

"Did you stick your finger in it to give it that good flavor, Sister?" asked a sun-dried prospector.

Tamsen enjoyed their awkward gallantry. These men would fight hard for her if she only could get that fight started. Suddenly

she knew what she could do. She knew when she heard what Sam Roper was saying.

"Look at Stuffy over there at the bar working up an appetite. Eating sure is a serious matter with him."

Tamsen's hand ladeling out soup suddenly trembled. She looked at Sam. "If Stuffy wants some soup he'd better hurry. It's going fast."

AS SAM went toward the man with the red beard, Tamsen reached under the counter. The bottle of liquid soap that Chip used for cleaning was still there. No one saw her shake a dash of it into an empty bowl.

"Here's the boy who knows good cooking, Miss Tamsen," said Sam.

Tamsen smiled at Stuffy. He had little black eyes that peered greedily from a fat, red face. She handed him the soap-flavored soup, watching his nostrils dilate slightly. She had started to wait on another customer when she heard an explosive splutter.

"Hell! What's wrong with this soup?" Stuffy bellowed.

Every man about the counter looked around in surprise.

"There's a lady present, Stuffy," Sam Roper reminded.

"She hands out dishwater and calls it soup!" Stuffy complained loudly.

"Shut up, you fat-joweled swine," Sam warned. "This soup is good."

Chip hurried from behind the bar. "What's the trouble here?"

"This soup you tryin' to pizen me with!" yelled Stuffy. "Here, take the damned stuff."

Grabbing the bowl, he threw it. The bowl missed Chip and crashed into the bar mirror, which cracked with an explosion like a gun shot. Some of the hot soup splashed a customer, who lashed out with his fist, catching Stuffy's fat jaw.

Tamsen had not counted on such immediate violent action. Some of Stuffy's friends were on hand. While fists and bottles flew, she crouched behind the counter. Tables were overturned, a chair smashed into the rows of bottles behind the bar, and a demijohn sailed noisily through the front window.

Tamsen contrived a little damage herself when she deliberately pushed over a tray piled with dishes. As it struck the floor with a tremendous smash, she saw Dave come in. He was looking straight at her, but he did not pause to speak. Chip was fighting with his back to the wall, and he needed help.

Tamsen did not wait to see the finish. She climbed through the broken window and hopped into the street. She almost ran to the wheelwright's shop. The wagon was ready.

The sun was getting low when she approached the ranch. Morman crickets clicked in the high grass along the creek that skirted the trail. Tamsen lifted her nose to sniff with pleasure. She could smell freshly cut hay. Pete must have been working. Work was good. It could heal all human ills.

Suddenly she gasped and shaded her eyes. Hay cocks dotted a large area. Pete could not have cut all that hay. She squinted and stared. Now she could make out active forms in the distance. Men. Ten—twenty—thirty men mowing her grass with hand

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7¢ Very Bright Light	3¢ Very Bright Light	4¢ Very Bright Light
2¢ Good Light	5¢ Good Light	4¢ Good Light
1¢ Fair Light	2¢ Fair Light	2¢ Fair Light

scythes, raking it with a horse rake, and pitching it into the rounded cocks.

"Good old Pete!" she thought happily.

He must have rounded up the men who had been laid off because of the breakdown at the smelter.

She unhitched the draught horses from the wagon, rubbed them down and fed them. She went into the house and changed the blue dress for jeans. Now she felt natural. Her eyes were shining when she went to the corral for her saddle horse. Through the pale golden sunlight she rode toward a group of mowers.

"Where's Pete Brent?" she asked a man who had stopped to wipe his brow with a red bandanna.

"Ain't seen him all day. He weren't here when Dave Melton brung us out."

"Dave Melton!" All the color went out of her face.

"Sure. Dave hired us early this morning to do this here job. Even sent out a chuck wagon to feed us. He said you did him a good turn and he was trading favors."

Her dark eyes blinked. Pop Waring had said that a woman makes headway with a man when he does something big for her, but this time it wouldn't work out right. When Dave saw her push over that tray of dishes—

"We're bedding down tonight in the bunkhouse," the man went on.

Tamsen nodded vaguely and touched her spurs to her horse's flanks. She had not eaten since breakfast, but now her hunger was gone. Listlessly she went to the kitchen and opened a can of beans and tried to eat some. Life had no savor, no interest. She did not even care about estimating how many tons of hay had been cut today.

She wished Pete would show up. How could a girl's brother be willing for her to remain alone all night while the bunk house was filled with strange, rough men? Tears filled her eyes.

She went out to the little porch. A thin new moon pierced the silver twilight. The fragrance of the hay hung rich and heavy. From the trail far below the ranch house came the rhythmic sound of hoofs, exciting music for ears attuned to silence.

"Pete!" she breathed thankfully, going in to start the kitchen fire so that he could have a warm supper.

But it was not Pete who dismounted and tapped at the kitchen door. Pushing back the sizzling bacon, she opened the door on Dave.

"I didn't want you to be alone with the hay hands tonight," he said. "You can ride in with me. Or I'll stay."

Her hands holding open the door for him to enter felt suddenly clammy.

"Where's Pete?" she got out. She looked up at him with wide, frightened eyes, in which the lamplight picked out a shining tear.

"Pete's all right," he said gently, staring at that one tear which clung to her lashes. "Pete is on his honeymoon."

"His honeymoon—" Her voice failed.

"He and Dot got married this afternoon."

He spoke quietly, as though he held himself in hand. His face in the shadow of his hat told nothing, but she knew the way his grey eyes looked when he was very hurt.

"Dave—I'm sorry," she whispered. Her broken voice held regret for what she had done to him today. "I'll—I'll take Dot's place permanently in your saloon, if it will help you."

"You will like hell," he said.

Tamsen dropped her head. There was no argument for her to make. She had not been sure until now that he had seen her push that tray of dishes off the counter during the fight. Maybe he had had a talk with Stuffy, too.

When he reached out and seized her shoulders, she did not fight. She needed punishment again.

"Go on and kiss me, you big lug," she sobbed. "I ought to be spanked—"

She did not finish because that third kiss had started. And this kiss was like the other two rolled into one. It had the exquisite tenderness of the first, the savage urgency of the second, and a new quality of possessiveness that drove its substance into the core of her life.

"I won't have my wife working in my saloon," he said.

"What?" Disbelieving, she looked into his eyes. They were not hurt. They were not angry. They were just tender.

"I wouldn't have those hombres ogling my wife. It was all right for a girl like Dot. But my wife—"

He kissed her again. When she came up for breath she had a joyous question to ask him:

"Sir, are you *jealous?*"

KEEP AWAY, YOU GALS!

By
Harriet
A.
Bradfield

I've got this man staked out for mine,
So keep away, you gals!
I'll have you know that he is marked
For my own home corrals.

I saw him first, and recognized
That he was worth my time,
And set myself to win his heart
By all means short of crime.

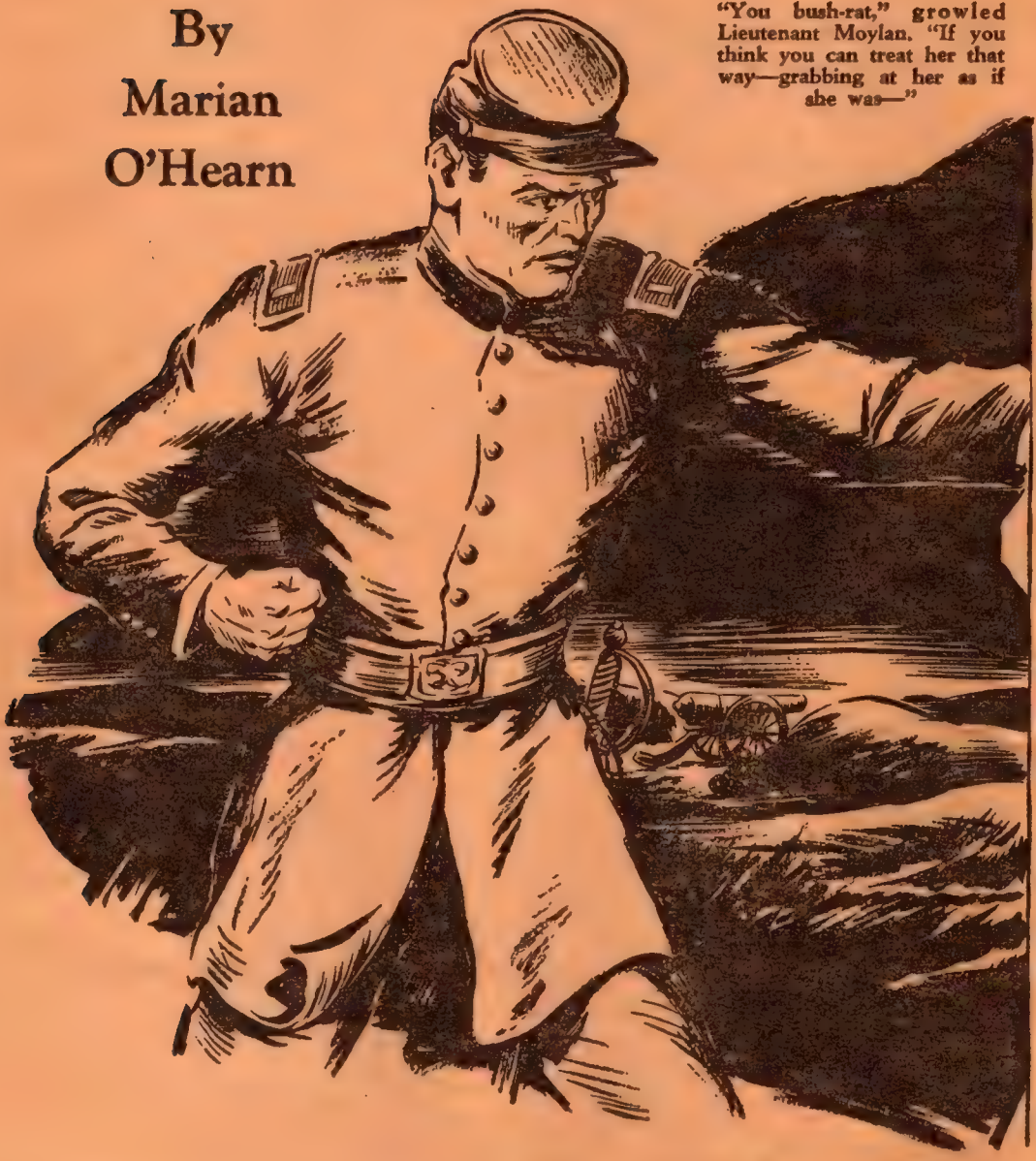
But I confess it's really love
Which makes me feel so bold;
That's why I've staked so carefully
A claim I mean to hold.

I'll hang my saddle on the wall,
For I've no wish to roam;
I'll settle down to win his love
And make myself a home.

But staking out a man for mine
Is merely a good start.
The question is, how soon will he
Set his stakes round my heart?

♥ ♥ PHANTOM

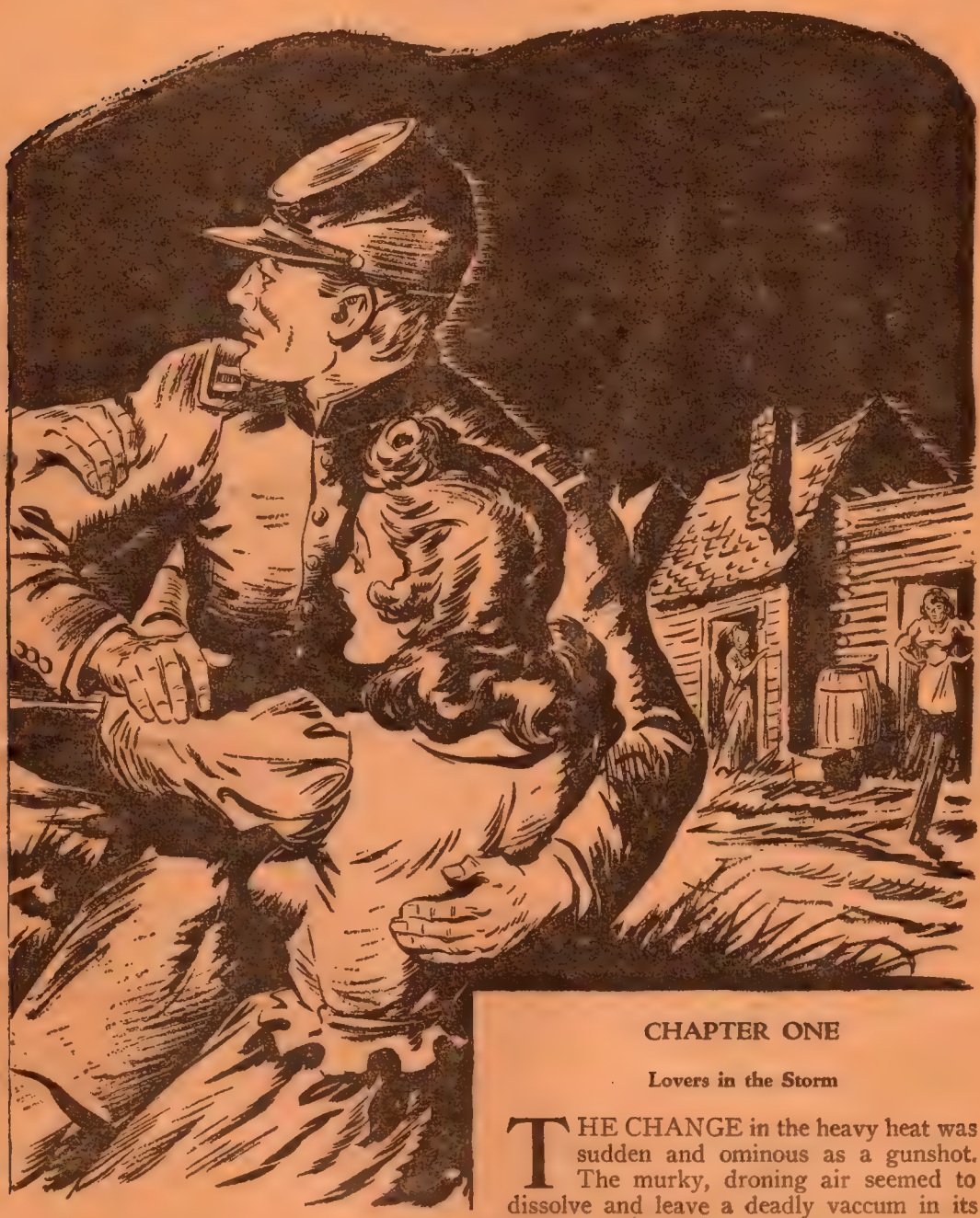
By Marian O'Hearn



"You bush-rat," growled Lieutenant Moylan. "If you think you can treat her that way—grabbing at her as if she was—"

When the army post branded Iris Ward . . . officer's game—the beautiful laundress of lowly Suds Row made up her mind to play the dangerous game.

SWEETHEART



Romance Novelette of the Old Frontier

CHAPTER ONE

Lovers in the Storm

THE CHANGE in the heavy heat was sudden and ominous as a gunshot. The murky, droning air seemed to dissolve and leave a deadly vaccum in its place. And the vaccum became fire-hot stillness.

The shock of that terrible, soundless flame made Iris Ward straighten and turn to look at the women around her. Then she became motionless, waiting for under-

standing, while invisible clammy fingers ran up the nerves of her back. Her body was taut with listening and her eyes became disbelieving as she watched the dozen laundresses at work in the shed. The movements of their thick red arms and swollen hands continued without interruption, as if they realized nothing of what was happening.

Iris Ward's lips parted and she started to call to them. Instead, she turned and walked to the door . . . the clammy fingers still tracing out the pattern of all the nerves beneath her flesh.

Outside, she saw that the sky was a glowing copper and winced as the searing heat pushed into her lungs. In the strange, lifeless hush the pounding of her own heart was a dizzy roaring in her ears.

"Sirrocco," Iris murmured. And, her eyes on the copper sky, she started for the river which was only a few yards away. Hurrying to the edge of the cliff-like bank, she looked down at the swirling water which had become swifter and blacker, the current churning up mud to thicken its deadliness.

Iris again said, "Sirocco," and her eyes were the oppalescent green of an evening sky. Standing very quietly on the cliff-edge between mud-black water and reddened clouds, she felt part of herself tear free—or reach violently out to meet threatening violence.

It came, then. The wind struck with the crack of high thunder and the river below surged upward, throwing mud against its banks. The wind, whipping the invisible flame which had replaced the air, burned the skin of her face. But she kept her eyes on the sky, narrowing the lids against the sheets of sand carried by the wind. She had known this was how the cyclonic sirocco would be, although she had never before experienced it.

Some reaching thing brushed against her and missed. Fighting the wind in order to turn, she saw that the something was a man's hand. The hand closed on her arms and she had a blurred picture of a tall, uniformed figure. Then she was lifted from her feet. Carrying her, the man began to run through the wall of storm.

"It's the sirocco," she yelled into the screaming wind. "Put me down! I can walk!"

The man's staggering, laborious battle went on. The beating, sobbing gale shook him, almost toppled him over but he kept on moving. Iris realized that he was making for an empty wooden building which had once been a barracks. She closed her eyes against the sand but the shrieks of demoniacal travail filled her ears.

The pounding echoes dropped to a roar and the wind stopped tearing at her flesh. Realizing they had finally reached the abandoned barracks, she opened her eyes and wiped the layer of sand from her mouth.

The uniformed man, gasping harshly, put her down and reeled onto the nearest bunk platform which had been stripped down to the wooden supports. He sagged, head forward, for a moment and then got out a handkerchief to clear his eyes of sand. The noise outside the flimsy building was louder than the hoofs of a stampeding herd, but inside the only sound was the raw echo of the soldier's fight to breathe.

Iris walked to another bunk platform and sat down. Her eyes went to the window which shook under the pressure of the wind. The river now would be even thicker with churned mud as the water strove to reach the copper colored sky.

"Well!" The rasp of struggling breath had ended but the man's voice was sharp with anger. "That was quite a stunt—standing in the open during a storm like this. And right over the river! I'm beginning to understand why the army prefers bachelor officers."

Iris' glance swept pleasantly over him. "Are you, Captain?" she murmured.

He looked at her carefully with eyes which were the clear gray of silver. "No," he said, "I'm not. Just made a mistake." He swung to his feet and grinned. "And I'll never go on another expedition if I can help it. You must've arrived while I was away from Fort Mintern."

"Maybe. I'm not sure." Her smile made glinting ripples of gold across her eyes.

"*I'm* sure. Otherwise we would've met. My expedition just pulled in at dawn."

Her eyebrows moved. "I hope the—expedition was successful. Most of those against the Arickaree Indians don't accomplish much."

The officer's weathered face lost some of its youngness and his eyes became an even

clearer gray. "Is that true?" he asked, too gently.

Iris suddenly found a new awareness of him; an angry realization that he was not just another faceless, unimportant being wearing the insignia of his commission. Until this second he had been merely one more young army officer; a fit-looking man with a sun-darkened face, firm chin and good teeth. Now she was conscious of the strong-boned construction of his body, of the way his feet, in heavy troop boots, claimed the space beneath them. He was blonde, lean hipped and flat shouldered. And there was an intangible extra thing in his eyes and on his mouth.

"So I've heard," she said, making her tones light. Settling back on the bunk platform, she surveyed him with frank appraisal.

"An army post is just the place to hear anything and everything," he murmured; then added, with cool formality: "Captain Charles Varnum at your service, Ma'am."

"Thank you."

"For nothing. But now that you know me, you'd better call me Sandy so I'll recognize my name."

The girl's smile once more made a glinting ripple across the surface of her eyes. "How do you, Captain Varnum. I'm Iris Ward."

HE PUT out his hand and her glance dropped from his face to the square, blunt-fingered hand. She accepted it slowly and as his fingers closed over hers his eyes sharpened. He was seeing and silently noting that her skirts had been tucked up almost to her knees, that the open neck of her dress was too low.

She freed her hand and waited, making no attempt to lower her skirts or fasten her dress. Snapping, creaking noises were coming from the storm-beaten building and the wind-roar was greater than the noise of the vastest herd. There wasn't much chance of the barracks being demolished and she was safe here. The sense of safety was increased by the threatening uproar outside and by the presence of this man whose assurance claimed even the earth on which he stood.

Iris stirred sharply away from her own thoughts and realized that Varnum was also waiting, his glance as frankly appraising as hers. His eyes told her that her waist was very small above the bunched-up skirts, that her slender legs were strong and her slipper-clad feet delicately high of arch. In the reflection which he was giving, the lines of her arms and shoulders were as fine as those of her legs. Her short, deeply waved hair was silver-sheened seal brown and her skin a clear, still white.

With such skin her eyes should have been blue. Instead, they were green and seemed to belong to another, softer land which touched eyelids with dusky shadows and made lashes black as a tropic night. The alien shadowing also called attention to her high cheekbones and taut-fleshed lips.

"Iris," Varnum murmured and in his voice was an echo of the hot tumult clawing at the old building. "There's a song about that name. It—but I won't recite it just yet. I suppose you know 'Iris' was the Goddess of the Rainbow."

The girl's green glance showed the tiny, hard points of gold and she grinned. "What a useless thing to be! Goddess of a Rainbow!"

"Nothing beautiful is ever useless." His eyes had become like bits of gray mirror fogged by a stormy breath. "And you're very beautiful."

Her grin faltered but she widened it, quickly, and chuckled. "We were speaking of rainbows. Have you ever seen a rainbow in a washtub?"

Varnum did not answer and again she stirred in awareness of the part of him which was intangible, yet definite as the sirocco itself. The sharpening consciousness was uneasiness groping through her, making her suddenly afraid of the storm. In its grip the barracks shed swayed slowly and rhythmically like a huge animal attempting to dance. Yet the shaking building actually held all of life right now. All of her world, at least. And she and Varnum might be crouching in the primitive security of a cave they had always shared.

"How long do you suppose we'll be here?" Iris asked, wanting to end the silence between them.

"Can't tell. Maybe one hour, maybe six." He went to the dust-thickened window. "From here," he added, "it looks as if the peak hasn't been reached yet, so we

might as well take it easy for a while."

He returned to his bunk platform. "What this post needs is more comfort in the shacks it abandons. The Army ought to provide a few chairs or cushions, some good books and a reasonable stock of refreshments. That's the least it could do when it moves out of a building."

Her answering smile was uncertain. The barracks was swaying more rapidly, keeping time to the flailing of the storm, as if the grotesque animal was finally launched into its awkward dance. Sandy Varnum's eyes were on her face and she tried not to think of the glowing coppery sky above rushing black water.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asked.

"What do you smoke?"

"Anything I can get. Lately I've been using cigarettes because it's easy carrying makings on the march. But if you don't like their smell, I'll forget it."

"I actually enjoy the smell of tobacco. In fact, I wish you'd roll one for me."

Light shot from the depth of his eyes and spread over their surface and the shape of his mouth became clearer, as if the waiting force behind his face had stirred. He said: "Sorry I forgot to offer you a cigarette."

He held the square of paper in steady, blunt-tipped fingers, poured in the tobacco, rolled it and closed the ends. Carrying it to her, he watched her place it between her lips. Then he bent to hold a match.

Her breath slowed, then suddenly quickened and rushed across her lips, blowing out the match. He struck another and she kept her eyes on his hands until the cigarette was lighted.

He rolled his own as he went back to the bunk platform. When he faced her again his eyes were narrowed against the lifting smoke. "How long have you been here?" he asked. "You're not wearing a wedding ring, which means you're an army girl or a visitor—if anyone 'visits' in the wilds of Dakota."

IRIS filled her mouth with smoke and let it trickle across the edges of her small white teeth. "I'm neither an 'army girl' as you mean that term, or a visitor." And, grinning, she added: "All of which will be clear enough—later on. But I'm waiting to hear about your expedition. Was it against the Sioux or the Arickarees?"

"Neither. We went to feel out the temper of the 'Rees, mostly. There's been a lot of talk about the Sioux organizing small tribes like the 'Rees into one big war party to fight the whites. But we didn't discover any such scheme. Still," the gray eyes were silver-colored again, "that doesn't mean the tribes aren't being organized. So we mapped part of the country, looked for trouble and finally—came home."

"And now?"

His grin started slowly and grew; it changed all the lines of his face. "I'm hoping Colonel Terry will let me stay right here for a while."

The barracks shed paused in its cumbersome dance and a second later shook so violently that Iris felt the floor twist under her feet. And then, for the first time, she sensed, without hearing, a vibrant humming which pressed through the walls like a savage voice. The sirocco was singing. . . .

"There's a dance tonight," Sandy Varnum's voice cut crisply through her silence. "Except that it's being called a 'ball' and held at the Colonel's house because the officer's club isn't big enough. Will you be there?"

She straightened so quickly that the poise of her head was startled as she looked up into his face. As she saw that the fog-gray tone of his eyes only partially concealed the far glow of coppery light. She did not speak but her hands lifted swiftly to fasten the neck of her dress.

"You might let your skirts down, too," he suggested. "By this time the whole fort is probably looking for you because you're missing during the storm. Someone's sure to realize you might have taken shelter here and if they came in right now they'd think you were—very informal."

A streak of color knifed up her throat to her face where it disappeared beneath the clear, still white of her skin.

"Thank you," she murmured. Standing, she began to unpin her skirt. Her slight body was poised at its full height, stressing the young firmness of the flesh. As she took out the last pin and let the dress drop slowly over her legs, she asked: "Is that better?"

"It's more—discreet," he told her and the stormy, coppery glow was in his glance.

"Fort Minter is like any other small town. Full of clucking old maids of both sexes."

"They don't seem exactly *clucking,*" Iris said. "The sounds they make are more like hissing. Yet," and her green eyes were almost opalescent in spite of the shadowing black lashes, "you want to remain on the post as long as possible."

As her words finished she let her full, taut-fleshed lips curve and her lids droop into heaviness. For the minute or the hour ahead nothing existed except the empty room of the old barracks and the man before her. For just the minute or the second she might challenge the disturbingly intangible part of him. Might even know victory. . . .

"I want to stay on post now," he agreed, his voice lowering. "Two hours ago I was wondering about the chance of a scouting trip into the Red River country, but that was two hours ago. For the last five minutes I've been trying to find out whether you're going to the ball tonight."

"No-o. I'm not." Her lips retained their full curve and her eyes searched his, trying to be sure about what was in their depths. Perhaps it *was* another reflection of an angry copper sky—part of the storm touching him, just as the brazen song of the wind was still calling an echo from herself.

"But you have to go! Pat will expect everyone to be there."

"Pat?"

Surprise flicked across his face. "I'm speaking of Patience Terry, the Colonel's daughter. The party's being held at their house, which you already know."

Iris was silent but the hard-pointed golden laughter sprayed across her eyes.

VARNUM said: "Come to think of it, you might let me call for you. Of course, that's just a thought, just something which occurred to me—as soon as I saw you. But you've already picked out an escort, of course. No, no," he went on. "Don't apologize! Especially as it must have taken you a week to decide on the man you'd go with. A girl like you on an army post probably writes the names of all hopeful males on slips of paper, puts on a blindfold and pulls one of them from the pile. Make out a slip for me, will you?"

"I've told you I'm not going," she said, and her voice cut off sharply; for the world had changed again. Existence itself had altered dizzily. The wind had stopped and dropped her into awful stillness. "It's over," she said, her words sounding small and faint in her own ears.

Varnum went to the dust-crusted window and wrenched up the sash. "Yes, and this is the time to run for it. There'll be rain now—enough to drown in. Come on."

He caught her arm and reached for the door. But the hand on the door dropped and he turned back to her with the far reflection of copper light pushing through the gray of his eyes. He did not speak. Iris' throat became tight with dryness as another kind of silence captured her. A silence so tense that it caught at all the pulses in her body and squeezed them into stillness, smothered them into motionlessness.

"Iris," Sandy Varnum said softly, "maybe *this* is the time to tell you the words of that song."

"No!" She forced the word through her throat and across her hurting lips. "Since 'Iris' was the Goddess of the Rainbow, we'll let it go at that because I know a lot about such things. Didn't I mention rainbows that end in a washtub?"

He bent over her, his hand tightening, his free arm going around her. And her halted pulsebeats were silenced drums straining to crash into violent, throbbing sound.

"Listen," Varnum murmured. "The lines go like this—"

But his words cut off and he straightened. "The rescue party's arriving," he said, and as he grinned, his mouth dipped at one corner. "It would."

His hand left her arm reluctantly, and, as it dropped to his side, the door was flung open. Two troopers and a girl entered hurriedly. The girl, tall and softly blonde, was breathless. Her violet eyes ignored Iris and came to rest, anxiously, on Varnum.

"Sandy!" Her voice was choked. "Thank heavens, you're safe! Mother and I went to your quarters to ask you to dine with us before the dance, but you weren't there. Then the storm started. I asked for two soldiers to help me find you. We had to stop and take shelter and as soon as it let up we made a dash for this place. Several men said they'd seen you going toward the

river." Her words ended as breathlessly as they had begun.

Varnum looked at her in surprise before he chuckled. "I'm certainly flattered, Pat." He chuckled again. "Just think of all the time I spent in the Sioux country without a single girl to protect me."

"Sandy! I didn't mean it that way—" Her words trailed off and her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. But the sudden color made her eyes very bright, and, as if aware of that, she smiled at him.

Iris' green gaze measured Colonel John Terry's daughter. Pat Terry was lovely, in her simple frock of thin, cool blue. She carried her height with easy grace and her face held the assurance sometimes called "aristocratic"—which was usually the result of always having had enough money.

"I expected a searching party to show up looking for Miss Ward." Varnum said. "If they're still hunting for her—"

"Miss Ward?" Pat Terry's blonde head turned and her violet eyes opened wide. She smiled and nodded. "Oh, Iris. How are you. Now, Sandy," she hurried on, "we'd better get out of here fast. The rain must already be starting. Let's hurry."

Sandy Varnum's gray eyes lost their silver tone as odd, coppery light flickered across them. His glance moved from Iris to Pat, thoughtfully, and he said: "Your trooper-escort is all you need to reach your house safely, if you start right now." He nodded at the waiting soldiers and told them: "Don't lose any time getting Miss Terry home."

The troopers saluted, wheeled to the door, stopped and waited for the girl.

"Aren't you coming, Sandy?" Pat Terry's tone was amazed.

"Not now. I'm looking after Miss Ward. She really got tossed around by that storm."

"Miss—Ward?" The amazement in Pat's voice grew, and again her violet eyes touched Iris.

Varnum said: "Yes. And right now. The rain's beginning. See you later, Pat." His hand on Iris' arm, Varnum jerked open the door and hurried her past the troopers.

Still holding her arm, he began to run, forcing her along with him. But when Varnum started north, Iris pulled free, calling: "That's not the way. I live over here."

She raced west, through the thin gusts of rain, toward a row of small cabins which had been painted a somber gray. Knowing that he was plunging after her, she darted to the door of the corner shack and turned to face him. "Thank you, Captain Varnum. I'm home now—and safe."

"Wait!" he said, as she started to open the door. "Is this all? What about tonight? The storm will be completely over before evening and if you'll change your mind, I'll call for you at nine."

She leaned against the gray door of the shack and looked up at him through narrowed, darkly shadowed lids. "You'll be caught in the middle of the rain," she reminded him.

"Never mind that. I'm used to rain. I want an answer. Shall I call for you?"

The flesh around her eyes became more deeply shadowed and her full lips lost their quietness. "Captain Varnum, you haven't been away that long! Look around you. This is "Suds Row" where the post laundresses live—where I live. I'm one of the laundresses."

His brows moved together and something flickered across his face. "All right," he said impatiently. "You're one of the laundresses. What's that got to do—" But his voice roughened and broke off. "The laundry workers are always the wives of enlisted men."

"Not always wives. Sometimes just members of their family. My brother is a soldier and I took any army job which would keep me near him. That ought to make you understand that I won't get to the ball tonight. Good afternoon and—thanks."

Thrusting a hand behind her, she pushed open the door, whirled and entered the cabin. She closed the door again very quickly but not before she saw that he was still standing before the little house while the gusting rain poured over him.

CHAPTER TWO

"I Don't Trust Women. . . ."

AT NINE o'clock that night, Iris put away the food she had cooked for her brother's supper and removed the dishes from the table. "Beau's not coming," she told herself and tried to deny the old,

painful fear that again welled up within her.

She wouldn't think of Beau or wonder how long he might remain away. She would remember the afternoon and the hour in the deserted barracks when Sandy Varnum had said that she was beautiful.

"I am, of course," she decided. "But it's nice to be told about it by a man like that." Her narrow brows moved and made lines in the flesh between them. What *was* he like? Or had she only imagined the intangible quality which held something of the hot storm's force.

She walked across the small kitchen to a mirror near the window and stared into it as if seeking the answer from her own reflection. The green muslin dress she had put on for supper deepened her eyes to the color of jade and, in spite of starched petticoats, stressed the youthful firmness of her body.

Lamplight brought out the silvery sheen of her brown hair and the still, clear white of her skin. "But don't forget," she told herself aloud, "you're a post laundress which means not only the wrong side of the railroad tracks but the wrong side of the river as well."

Patience Terry had made that clear without words. The message had been in her surprised violet eyes and in her cool, indifferent voice.

The colonel's daughter and the washlady.

Iris turned from the mirror with savage swiftness. And then the old fear which had been waiting, sprang. It dug into her and twisted through her. What was Beau doing that kept him away? He had no duty detail after six o'clock and yet he had not even sent word. If he had gone across the river. . . .

This was the reason she had come West with him after he joined the Army; and the cause of her being on the army payroll as a laundress which gave her the right to "military travel."

Beau's enlistment had been sudden and startling. And it was weeks later that she learned the truth. Her brother had become drunk and gambled for money he did not possess. He had lost and was ordered to pay up within twenty-four hours. Knowing that failure might mean sudden death, he had hidden in the Army.

He had been pathetically grateful for her offer to go West with him and had promised there would be no more drinking or gambling. But during the past few days his breath had been heavy with liquor.

"I'm going to look for him," she decided.

The early darkness was pleasantly soft, as if there had never been a deadly, flaming storm. Leaving Suds Row she went toward the barracks, paused uncertainly before the open doors and then continued on to the "Enlisted Recreation Shed," a rambling building made of warped, unseasoned wood. It was empty and she turned back, walked slowly north, past the huts of the Indian scouts, toward the opposite side of the river.

But she halted, sharply, at the sound of music. This was commissioned territory and the music was coming from Officer's Row. "Pat Terry's having her dance," she thought. "And probably Sandy Varnum is enjoying it."

She started back and heard hurrying footsteps behind her. "Wait, Iris, please!"

It was Joe Moylan, a slim young lieutenant who had arrived from the East only two weeks before. As he reached her, he said hurriedly: "Where've you been? I have almost covered the post looking for you."

"Why aren't you at the party?"

"You know why." Lieutenant Moylan bent to see her face in the gloom. "You won't be there."

Iris was silent.

Lieutenant Moylan demanded: "Why do you keep running away from me? Why can't I come to your house to see you?"

She moved impatiently. "You know why. Officers don't visit Suds Row socially."

"That's silly, Iris! You don't give me a chance to prove how crazy it is. But let's get out of here to where we can talk. There must be some place we can be together."

"No. I'm looking for Beau. He doesn't seem to be on the post which means he may have gone across the river to the—drinking huts."

"He'll come back when—"

"I've got to find him. And I'm going acros the river. There are always Army skiffs at the water."

Lieutenant Moylan hesitated. Iris could feel swift anger in him as he said:

"I'll take you over. We'll go down to the landing from this side. It's quicker."

"I don't mind going alone."

"I mind it!" he told her, his tone both harsh and pleading. "I know I can't stop you but at least I can look after you. Come on."

He took her arm as they turned into the rough path leading down-slope to the river. Three small skiffs were tied up to the bank. The troopers assigned to them came to attention when Lieutenant Moylan approached. He ordered two soldiers to one of the skiffs. As soon as Moylan had settled the girl amidships, the soldiers started the strenuous row. The churning current caught at the skiff and whirled it completely around. But the troopers brought it about and fought grimly for the opposite shore.

The river had claimed many of the small boats, and no swimmer could survive the thick, choking waters of the current. Thinking of that sent a chill showering along Iris' back. She shivered. Lieutenant Joe Moylan put an arm around her and when she did not move away, whispered:

"You don't really—dislike me? I'd like to know that."

"Of course not!" She tilted her face up to his, smiling through the darkness, poised as if waiting to be kissed. His arm tightened and she let herself droop against him. His head bent to hers—but the skiff suddenly scraped the muddy shore. The troopers sprang out to haul it out of the water.

"Wait for us." Moylan told them, and started up the bank with Iris.

DIRECTLY above, starting almost at the river, was an uneven row of huts which were the saloon and gambling houses of the small, huddled town of Bismark. The street was dimly lighted and troopers, settlers, ranchers and Indians moved slowly along it or lounged in groups near open doorways.

Iris nodded toward the first drinking hut. "We'll probably have to search all of them," she said. "Which won't be much fun."

"Being with you is enough." Moylan's hand tightened on her arm as they entered the saloon.

Beau Ward was not there. When they reached the third hut, the suddenly shifting crowd caught them, thrusting them helplessly across the room. Moylan put his arms around Iris to protect her and his dark, boyish face set, his slender body strained to hold off the surging, stumbling men. Voices were shouting excitedly and one cracked above all the others:

"I don't take orders from you, hombre! I don't take orders from anybody except the United States Army."

"Joe, Joe!" Iris cried. "That's Beau's voice. He's here—and there's trouble. Let me go!"

Wrenching away from Moylan, she pushed through the jam of customers who had pressed back to leave a clear space around two men. One of them was her brother, his face red and distorted by alcohol.

The other man was tall and black-haired. And, although Iris could see only his back, she stopped abruptly, halted by a quality of fear that was as strong as shock. There was a dark sinuousness about him. Iris could sense the tough muscular flesh beneath his clothing, as one sensed the power of a cougar in the fraction of a second before it sprang.

He was not dressed like the other civilians in the saloon, but wore buckskin-fringed pants tucked into boots, a blue flannel shirt and black neckerchief. Two guns in tied-down holsters sagged from his belt.

Iris could not hear what he was saying to her brother, but Beau's voice soared again, shouting: "Out of my way, bushwhacker! I'll—" Lunging forward, Beau swung a clenched fist.

The tall man's sinuous body swayed, his arm flashed out. Beau staggered back, his face blank. For a desperate second he struggled to keep his feet and then fell like a dead weight.

Iris ran to Beau who was lying, face-down on the floor. She turned him over, put one arm under his head and with her free hand touched his face. It was cold and damp. Hastily, she felt for his pulse.

"He's not dead." A low, resonant voice said. "I'll take care of him."

She was lifted to her feet. And only then did she recognize the man who had struck her brother. She stared at him and her green eyes became opalescent.

"You—" her taut-fleshed lips spat out the words—"you're the one who hurt him! I—I'll—"

He waited, standing exactly as he had when she first saw him, his tall body sinuously poised as an animal's. His face was quiet, its roughly hewn surface was unrevealing as a drawn curtain. His features were big and definite, his skin as dark as tree-bark. His eyes were hazel. The kind of hazel which looks tawny brown except in the light.

"What'll you do, Ma'am? Does that—does Beau Ward belong to you?"

Her words stopped, leaving their crooked shape on her mouth. "He's my brother. Why did you strike him?"

"To teach him a lesson—maybe."

His low, easy tone sparked her fury back to life. She said: "Maybe *you* need a few lessons!"

"Iris." Lieutenant Joe Moylan finally broke free of the encircling crowd. "You should've waited for me." He saw the unconscious Beau, then, and his glance flicked to the dark man. "What happened?"

Iris answered, her fury choking her: "This—*he* hit him, knocked him down!"

Lieutenant Moylan's young face set. "Why?" he demanded. "Striking a man in uniform—a United States soldier—is a misdemeanor. If he's seriously injured it may become a felony."

THE tall, black-haired man looked down at him, stared into his face for a second and then grinned, slowly. "Is that so?" he asked, his voice soft. "Never thought of the legal angle, but there's no time to talk about it now. I'll have young Ward brought to. Tell you what," he went on, putting a hand on the lieutenant's shoulder. "You and the young lady come and sit at this table right here. After Ward's fixed up I'll join you. We'll talk it all over."

He strode across the clear space which the crowd had left around him and Beau. The staring men broke apart to let him through. "Let's have that table here," he called.

Someone hastily dragged out a round, barroom table and three chairs for him. He said to Iris: "Here you are. Sit here and wait, won't you, Ma'am?"

Iris hesitated and glanced at Lieutenant Joe Moylan's confused face.

"Guess we might as well," Moylan muttered.

Iris nodded then and accepted the chair.

The black-haired man said: "My name's Ree Blackwell, Ma'am. I'll be right back."

"Ree Blackwell!" Lieutenant Moylan repeated, and took his place beside Iris. "So that's him!"

"Who?" she demanded, watching her brother being carried through the crowd.

"The biggest man in this part of Dakota. I heard about him even before I came out to Fort Minter. He bosses the district—and he's the law in Bismark. The town and surrounding country are safe from Indian attacks because of him—because the whole Arickaree tribe takes his orders. And the Arickarees patrol the range to keep other Indians out. Even the Sioux leave his stamping ground alone. That's how he got his name "Ree." It's short for Arickaree."

Iris was puzzled.

"But why? I mean, why should an Indian tribe feel that way toward a white man?"

"From what I was told they regarded him as a sort of guardian. Ever since he settled in Dakota, a few years ago, he's helped them. Negotiated with the army to save some of their land and so on. He's even made a couple of trips to Washington to get them a better deal—"

The empty chair opposite Iris scraped back and a big, bark-brown hand rested on its top. "May I?" Blackwell asked when the girl glanced up.

"Yes. Of—course."

"Thanks." He sat down and his dark-hazel glance swept over her, moved from her full lips to her eyes. "Your brother's come out of it and he'll be all right in a few minutes. At least, fit to start for Fort Minter."

Iris was silent.

Lieutenant Moylan cleared his throat. "What happened?"

"Nothing much. Ward got drunk and wanted to fight with everyone. When I tried to put him out, I had to get—firm."

Once more his glance probed at the girl's face. As their eyes met, she again thought of a poised cougar. "I'm sorry we met this way, Miss Ward," he said, and his low resonant voice seemed to reach for her; to touch her.

"So am I." The tawniness of his glance was a reflection of flame in the depths of his eyes. It made her aware of herself, of

her own loveliness and the steady pulsing of her heart. She lifted her head and her full, taut-fleshed lips curved. And she knew that he had accepted her smile as silent answer.

Moylan's youthful voice broke across the sudden, unreal silence. "Do you own this place, Blackwell?"

As Beau Ward came up to the table Ree Blackwell said easily: "Feeling better, Ward?"

"Yeah." Beau Ward's face was white and entirely sober. "Guess I ought to thank you—" he stopped as he saw Lieutenant Moylan and came stiffly to attention.

"At ease, at ease," Moylan muttered uncomfortably.

"The lieutenant helped me look for you," Iris explained. "I was—worried. Now we'd better get back to the fort."

Lieutenant Moylan sprang up to hold her chair. Ree Blackwell was already on his feet. "How'd you come over?" he asked Iris.

"In an army skiff."

BLACKWELL frowned. "They're too dangerous for a girl. I'll take you over in my boat. Sorry there's not room for you and Ward, Lieutenant, but I can't let a woman take such a chance."

"But—" Moylan's young face set, and his voice was crisp as he started to speak.

"It'll work out better, anyhow," Blackwell went on, talking through the officer's words. "You can be sure Ward reaches the post—he's probably feeling rocky—and I'll escort his sister right to her door."

Blackwell turned back to the girl and took her arm, hurrying her from the table. The crowd in the drinking hut was still thick, but it opened to let them through.

"Wait." Iris said, when they reached the hard-packed dirt walk edging the street. "My brother and Lieutenant Moylan are still inside."

"They'll get out. Soldiers can usually look after themselves," he told her and the firm pressure on her arm kept her moving at his side.

His boat, tied up a short distance from the army craft, was three times as large as a skiff and carried two short sails. Four men appeared from the shadows of the bank and stepped in to man the oars. The seat in which Blackwell placed her actually had a backrest and there was a folded blanket lying beside it.

The boat shoved off and Ree Blackwell stretched out at her feet, his tall body relaxing like that of a great cat.

"Why did you insist on taking me across?" Iris asked. "Don't you trust soldiers?"

He sat up, his arm brushing against her knees. And even through the darkness she could feel his glance on her face, could sense its tawny flame. "The only person I completely trust is myself," he said, his voice dropping to harshness.

Iris laughed softly. "No one else?"

"No," the word was calmly definite. "I especially don't trust women," he added in the same tone.

The laughter left her throat and she said: "Perhaps you don't like women, either. I think I felt your dislike of them as soon as we met."

"You're right. I can't like them—much. At least, not in this country where they get in the way and complicate everything. Every woman who comes to Dakota spells trouble. If the men, who've got the job of civilizing the place, aren't running themselves breathless to wait on the latest arrival, they're killing each other over her."

"It must be a great hardship," Iris agreed, her thin tone striking at him.

He was silent.

When the boat touched shore, he stepped out to help the men pull it away from the water. Then he lifted her down onto the dry ground and they started up the slope to the post.

Suds Row was dark and silent when they reached the corner cabin.

"Good night and—thank you," the girl said.

"Not so fast." Ree Blackwell's hand found her shoulders and closed on them. "I'm still trying to figure you out. I need a little more time."

"Is it necessary to 'figure me out'?"

"Maybe." The pressure of his fingers recalled her first sight of him; of the sinuous flesh moving under the clinging flannel shirt. Then, there had been flame in his eyes—a tawny flame. "Maybe it's even important."

His hands slid from her shoulders to her waist and he took her into his arms. She

tried to see his face as he bent to kiss her but then his mouth found hers and the night exploded. Or it seemed that way, at first. Yet, a second later she realized that on his lips was the same, surging flame she had seen in his eyes. It was a demanding thing. It might even be consuming.

She ended the kiss and stood very still as if waiting. His arms dropped at once. He did not speak, merely waited. Yet she was conscious of tautness in that waiting.

"I thought you didn't like women," she said coolly. "At least, you told me that you didn't. Or didn't you mean what you said?"

He straightened, making a tall dark outline against the night. "I meant it. I don't trust women—or like them very much. But that has nothing to do with us—with you and me. There may be something more—something beyond—even trust or liking."

Iris stepped back, away from him while warmth as searing as the sirocco poured into her face. "You'd better stick to—the Indians," she said, her voice choked. "Or your jungle. Good-by."

The unlocked door swung open at once and she closed and bolted it before lighting the lamps.

CHAPTER THREE

The Suds Row Scandal

THE next day at dusk, Iris set the supper table and thought about the dress she would wear to the post dance on the following night. It was of dark-rose muslin with a tremendous skirt supported by hoops. She had been hurrying home from laundry every afternoon for two weeks to have it finished in time. And now she was sure it would be the prettiest dress at the dance and certain that Sergeant Jack Lee, her escort, would be sufficiently proud. Lee, a friend of her brother's, was a quiet, likable man whose ambition was to leave the Army and settle down on a ranch.

An abrupt knock at the door startled her and she put down the plates in her hand, thinking: "Beau's early. That means I won't have to worry about him tonight—" But then she realized that her brother would have entered without knocking. She hurried to answer.

"Good evening, Iris." Captain Varnum, even fairer and leaner in a crisply new uniform looked down at her with eyes which, even in the twilight, were the color of silver.

"Good—evening. I'm just getting supper," she explained hastily.

"Does that mean you're not going to ask me in?"

"What do you want—why did you come here?"

"You know why. I have to talk to you." His eyes changed and took on the gray of dark fog.

"Then we'll talk outside. My brother will be here soon."

"Does that make any difference."

She stepped out and closed the door behind her. "You know it does. On an army post officers don't visit an enlisted man's sister."

He moved impatiently. "Let's forget that stuff. I've got to see you, to be with you, and I'll find a way to do it. When I found you in the storm, yesterday, I knew I'd have to follow—wherever you went. It was like that with me and, for a minute or two, I thought it might be the same way with you."

"Captain Varnum—"

"Stop. The name is Sandy."

"Listen to me. None of your brother officers or their wives would have anything to do with you if you—showed any interest in one of the post laundresses."

"My 'brother officers' certainly would! They'd wish they had found you first."

"Their wives would still manage to have you ostracized. It's the women—wives, sisters and daughters—who run an army post, and you know it."

"That still doesn't impress me. I want a chance to know you, to let you know me. If seeing me here in the fort would worry you, we can go across the river. There are restaurants in Bismarck where we can have dinner—"

He broke off as she shook her head. But his weathered face set and she was aware, again, of the intangible part of him. A determined, unsurrendering force which was now battering against her senses.

"Iris," he murmured as he reached for her hands, his fingers closing fiercely over them. "You won't refuse. I won't let you." And freeing her hands, he caught her into his arms, pulled her closer.

His kiss was swift and too determined.

His lips bruised her mouth. She shivered, thinking of the churning black water of the river beneath a wild copper sky. But his mouth softened and his kiss became gentle. Silence swept around the girl. A deep, tense silence which pressed against her pulses until they seemed to halt. The moment spread out to the edge of pain when her checked pulses became free and beat like drums against her flesh.

There was a brittle sound from somewhere in the dusk and something hurtled toward them. Then Sandy Varnum's arms tore away from her and he was being jerked around.

"You bush rat!" growled Lieutenant Moylan, his hand still gripping Varnum's shoulder, thrusting out his white, distorted face. "If you think you can treat her that way—grabbing at her as if she was—"

"Shut up!" Captain Varnum pulled Moylan's hand from his shoulder and pushed him back.

"Not until I've given you the licking you need!" Lieutenant Moylan's voice rose to a shout and he rushed at the captain.

Iris, motionless with surprise, heard doors opening along Suds Row. And as Varnum blocked Moylan's rush and attempted to hold him, people began to hurry from the huts. Bulky laundresses were followed by soldier husbands who grouped together a few feet from the officers and stared.

"Moylan," Captain Varnum's low voice grated, "we can't have a run here. The men are watching us already. It can be settled at—"

"Oh, no!" Moylan leaped again, fists swinging, and caught Varnum on the jaw.

"All right." Varnum muttered. His own fist flicked out. Moylan staggered and dropped to his knees. He was up again at once, but a huge, powerfully built sergeant, running past the group of watching soldiers, caught the young lieutenant's arm.

"You can't do this, Sir," he growled.

"Let me go!" Moylan raged.

"No, Sir." He linked a thick arm through Moylan's. "We'll just walk along side by side, Sir." The sergeant started away bearing Moylan with him.

Iris watched them disappear beyond the guard house and then her glance flicked down Suds Row. The soldiers were still staring. But now their stares rested on her. Their wives were also looking at the girl and their faces were heavily smug with disapproval. No one spoke. Even the laundresses who worked beside Iris every day were making their indignation very plain.

Iris lifted her head and curved her lips into a smile. But color was stabbing into her face like knife points. For she knew what was happening; knew that to the enlisted men and their wives she had become "officer game," a significantly ugly term.

She knew that Captain Varnum was waiting. When she finally glanced at him, he was standing as rigidly erect as if at attention. His eyes, fixed on the silently disapproving onlookers, were the color of silver.

"I'd give anything I've ever had to undo this," he told her, his voice rough with concern.

"There's nothing to be done—except say good-by."

"We'll make it good night, instead," he said, taking her hand, and bending over it in a stiffly military, formal gesture.

"Good-by," Iris repeated softly and there was the taste of tears in her mouth.

EAU entered the cabin very quietly. Iris, in the kitchen, heard the soft closing of the door and went into the main room. "Is it true?" her brother demanded and his face was as distorted as if he were drunk. "Have you been letting some of the officers come here to visit you when I'm away?"

Fire blazed up over her body to her face. But instantly the fierce warmth was gone, leaving her flesh cold. "No," she said, her eyes on his. "No one has called on me."

"That's a lie!" He strode toward her, almost threateningly. "Wasn't there a row—a fist fight here between Captain Varnum and Lieutenant Moylan—this afternoon?"

"Yes, but they weren't visiting me. Neither of them entered the house. I talked to Captain Varnum outside and—"

"Naturally, he wouldn't make a formal call on a laundress!" Beau broke in. "Where else have you been talking to him? Do you have secret places to meet him—and Moylan?"

Iris' green eyes became opalescent and the heavy, shadowed lids pressed together.

"I'm sorry you said that. Don't say such things again, because I won't stand for it."

"*You* won't stand for it! How much do you suppose I'll take? Everyone in the fort's gabbing. I heard the story four times on my way home, from kind concerned friends. They feel sorry for me because my sister's *officer game.*"

"You'd better stop, Beau." Iris said and turned back into the kitchen.

"Not until I know what this is all about! I'll—"

A knock cut through his words and the girl heard him stamp to the door. When it opened, he said in completely changed tones: "Well, this is something! Come in, come in."

A resonant male voice answered. Iris halted sharply.

Beau charged into the little kitchen. "Come in," he told her. "Ree Blackwell's here and wants to see you."

She shook her head and her lips parted to refuse, but instead of speaking, she walked past her brother, saying: "Hello and welcome to Suds Row."

"Thanks." The room seemed too small for him. When she accepted his hand the pressure of his fingers made her remember the touch of his mouth. "This is going to be about the shortest call on record because I have to get back to Bismarck in a hurry. I came over to ask about the dance tomorrow night. Any chance of your going with me?"

"The post dance?"

"That's the only one I've heard about. The boys have invited me every month for more than a year—so it's time I showed up."

Iris sat down. When Blackwell had folded his tall body into another chair, she said: "I'm going with one of the troopers—Sergeant Jack Lee."

The hazel eyes became tawny as they caught and held hers. "You're sure? I mean, it's a definite—engagement."

"Of course." And she knew that he was remembering the slow seconds when they had been together in the darkness.

He swung up to his feet. "In that case, I'm unlucky. Good night, Ma'am."

"But I'll see you at the dance," she said politely.

With his hand lifting to the door he halted and looked at her, the hazel glance probing her face. "Yes, I'll be there anyhow," he said, as if coming to a sudden decision. "Maybe you'll give me a dance."

"Certainly, if you can forget—during the dance—how much you dislike women."

Blackwell grinned. "I've already forgotten."

She closed the door after him and her brother whistled softly. "That's certainly something. Ree Blackwell! Say, compared to him these army officers are—"

"Beau, I've told you we'll never mention that subject again. Your supper's on the table and you can eat it alone. I'm not hungry."

She crossed the main room to an open doorway covered by a heavy curtain. Pushing it aside, she entered her box-like bedroom and got out the rose muslin dress she had made for the dance. She sat there staring at it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kisses With a Future

IRIS, bent over one of the tubs in the big laundry shed, had her arms immersed in soapy water when Colonel Terry's orderly arrived. He stiffened, saluted, and with his face blank, said: "The Colonel's compliments, Miss. He asks you to come to his headquarters office at once."

"At once?"

"Yes, Miss." And with an equally proper salute, the orderly departed.

She dried her hands and arms, glancing at the other women. But they kept their eyes on their work or on some point just above her head. The laundresses on either side of her had been utterly silent throughout the morning and she had been publicly locked out of their world. She was officer game and unfit for association with respectable people.

Now, the fort commander had sent for her and she was sure of what he would say.

Unpinning her tucked-up skirts, she let them fall about her ankles and started out of the shed. But at the door, she stopped and with her chin tilting up, called: "See you later. I've been asked to have coffee with the Colonel."

She walked swiftly north, across the parade grounds toward regimental headquarters and her stride was so firm that it thrust at the sunlit ground. She would

hear what Colonel Terry had to say, and not care. Nor would she care what the residents of Suds Row thought or felt. Instead she would do what she could to enjoy the role of outcast. Maybe she would even play the part they had assigned her.

At the headquarters building, an orderly gave her a seat, disappeared and returned to announce: "The Colonel will see you now. This way, please."

With stiff correctness he ushered her into a big, bare-floored office which contained a single desk, and rows of files.

Colonel Terry got to his feet, his glance shooting up at her from under frosted brows. He was a pleasant looking man with keen eyes and thick, gray hair. "Sit down, Miss—yes, Miss Ward. In this chair right beside my desk."

"Thank you." She folded her hands together, lifted her head and waited.

The colonel cleared his throat, fumbled at some papers and finally began: "You're Iris Ward, the sister of Private Ward?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What can you tell me about the—trouble at your place? In front of your home, I mean."

"I don't know of any trouble."

The colonel's jaws stiffened. "Then you're the only one on the post who doesn't. I've heard twenty different accounts of a fight between two officers. The fight seems to have been over you."

Iris met his eyes and her own became almost opalescent. "Have you asked the officers, Sir? That is, if you know who they are."

"I know who they are!" he said coolly. "Captain Varnum and Lieutenant Moylan. Naturally I don't expect them to—talk in an incident involving a woman. So, I thought you might help me."

"That sounds as if you think women have no—scruples."

The colonel's glance sharpened and bored into her face. But the corners of his mouth twitched over the ghost of a grin. "Well, these things are always—difficult," he murmured. "I can see your side, too. Still, now, young lady, I must tell you this. On an army post certain conventions and customs have to be maintained. One of the—customs—forbids socializing between officers and enlisted men or their families. This occurrence has the whole fort boiling with gossip. I must ask you to be sure the incident isn't repeated."

Iris did not speak until she was sure he had finished. Then she got to her feet and said: "I understand, Sir. May I go now?"

She left with her chin tilted and her shadowed lids pressing her eyes into narrowness. There was a jerky pulse in her throat and her cheeks stung. But her full lips were curved.

The orderly opened the door. Iris went down the steps into the sunshine and saw Sandy Varnum standing on the walk. He saluted and grinned, one corner of his mouth dipping. "Saw you going into headquarters so I waited to take you home."

"You can't. The colonel sent for me. He made me understand that I'm to have no further acquaintance with any officer."

"That's very interesting," Varnum said, and touched her arm. "Let's go this way. It's pleasanter."

"This way" was the walk leading past the eight houses of Officers Row.

Iris said: "I've just told you—"

"That I can't know you or be with you because I hold a commission and your brother doesn't. But that's such stupid old-world stuff I have to ignore it."

"Try to understand—"

"Sandy!" The light cool voice floated from the porch of the largest house in the row. Pat Terry hurried down the steps. "Where've you been all this time? I couldn't understand why you didn't come to my party."

Sandy's grin dipped the corner of his mouth. "This is Miss Ward, Pat. But I forgot that you've met before—the day of the storm."

"Yes, of course—the day of the storm," Pat murmured and her violet eyes darkened as she looked at Iris; darkened and then chilled until they held all the righteous reproof of the residents of Suds Row.

Iris smiled and her eyes became duskily narrow. "No, Miss Terry, I'm not working in the laundry this morning. Your father wanted to chat with me."

The blonde girl stiffened. "How nice. See you soon, Sandy. And make it soon, won't you? Come to tea."

Iris did not speak until they were well away from Officer's Row, but then she stopped and turned, sharply, to face him. "Please go now," she said. "I want to stay

in this post to be with my brother. If you ignore the colonel's orders I'll be told to leave."

His eyes became fog-dark and stormy. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

"Yes." Iris made the word very definite and walked on, before he could speak. She left him standing there. As she neared Suds Row, she thought: "Why did I do that? There was no reason for making him leave me—because nothing will make any difference now. No matter what happens, after this, I'll always be marked officer's game. So I might as well have kept that much!"

Her throat warmed and a too-thin laugh broke from her lips. "Maybe it's just as well to keep Sandy Varnum out of my life because of—the thing I felt in him. But there are plenty of other officers and Joe Moylan's quite manageable." Which made her realize she had not heard from Moylan since the huge sergeant had dragged him away from Suds Row.

T EIGHT o'clock Iris was ready for the dance. The rose muslin frock floated as lightly as chiffon, where it did not hug her waist or define smooth, firm lines. The skirt, supported by hoops, was a great flower brushing the floor with its petals. Above the low bodice the still whiteness of her skin took on faint, warm tints and the duskiness of the lids made her eyes seem dark.

She had brushed the waving, seal-brown hair until it was a sculptured frame for her face. "Tonight, everyone will know they were right about me because a laundress shouldn't look like this. But Jack Lee probably won't mind."

Beau stuck his head through the curtain covering the doorway of her room. "I'm leaving," he said. "See you at the dance."

The door slammed after him and a moment later she heard Jack Lee knock. As she answered her smile touched her green eyes with excitement. "Hello! Come in."

He entered silently, his face still, his glance shifting uneasily. "I'm mighty sorry I couldn't let you know before," he said and his words were falling chunks of wood.

"Sorry?" Iris' lips lost their curve. "For what? You're not late!"

"No," in the same tone, "but I have to tell you that I can't go."

Her eyes opened wide and became very light. She did not speak which forced him to add, hurriedly:

"I drew night guard duty for the week, beginning tonight. I only found out half an hour ago."

"Oh?" Her eyebrows moved and she pushed her lips back into a smile, as if they both did not know that he was lying. Even if he had been given guard duty, his sergeant's rating would have enabled him to shift it to someone else, at least for one night. Iris said: "I'm sorry. I've been looking forward to the dance for days."

He moved uncomfortably. "So've I—and I hope you'll accept my apologies."

"Of course I will. And drop in when you can. Beau and I always enjoy having you here."

"Yes. Well—good night."

She watched the door swing shut behind him and her lips twisted. "Sergeant Lee doesn't want to be seen with a girl marked officer game. Maybe all the men feel that way." Her hand touched the spreading skirt of the new rose dress. "There's a way to find out," she decided. "I'll go alone."

She heard the music as soon as she left the house but as she walked toward the big, wooden recreation building she realized that the night had become suddenly hot. The darkness was too thick to show a single star and the air pressed heavily against the earth.

The band had swung into a waltz which was silvery sprays of wistfulness. She paused to listen. When it ended, she went up the steps and across the porch to the open doors. Another waltz was starting and the dance-floor was almost too full. Troopers lined the walls and watched those fortunate enough to have a girl or wife in a country where there were hundreds of men for each woman. Even the stoutest of the laundresses was playing the belle. Swathed in a strange, purple gown which showed every bulge, she was whirling from partner to partner.

Iris' glance went to the other side of the hall and she realized that the officers' party had already arrived. The enlisted men always issued a formal invitation to all officers and their wives. The invitation was always accepted, although never returned.

Colonel Terry, his gray hair gleaming, was standing at the edge of the dance floor. A tall, dark head showed above the others and she thought, in odd, sharp surprise: "It's Ree Blackwell. With Pat Terry!"

The colonel's daughter was wearing thin, smart black and was very blonde, very patrician. Her face was tilted up to Blackwell's as they danced. Blackwell seemed intent, and Iris was sure that his eyes held tawny flame.

"Well, it's time." Iris told herself and walked into the room, passing directly in front of those gathered around the floor. The few women in the crowd made their faces blank and pretended they did not see her. The four-deep line of troopers looked at her, then stared for a second and looked away. No one spoke or nodded.

SHE found a place where everyone in the hall could see her and stood there alone, with rose dress a floating mist about her body, her face serene, her mouth smiling, her green eyes calm.

The dance went on and on. The band went, without pause, from waltz to two-step and back again. Voices around her grew louder and laughter became more frequent. But she was walled in by silence, as unnoticed as though she were not present.

Officer's game has been made my official rating, she thought. *I might as well go home.*

But a slim, young officer was making his way across the dance floor and as he neared her she recognized Lieutenant Joe Moylan. "Iris! You're—something I've dreamed up," he said, and his eyes actually held a gleaming dream. "Do I get a dance?"

She went into his arms gratefully and as soon as they were on the floor, Moylan said: "I've stayed away because I didn't want to start any more talk. I shouldn't have started a row at your home. The whole mess—is my fault."

"It doesn't matter," she said, conscious of the coldly watching eyes of the troopers.

Moylan asked: "Have you seen Captain Varnum?"

"Not tonight. Is he here?"

"I don't think so. I just got here."

The dance ended and they started off the floor but the wildly applauding crowd forced the band to continue. Before she could turn back to Moylan, Ree Blackwell's low, resonant voice said: "How about giving me a chance?"

"Why—" But suddenly she wanted to dance with him, wanted to watch the strange eyes light until they were like those of a great cougar.

"Is it all right, Lieutenant?" Ree took her into his arms without waiting for a reply and they moved silently across the floor, dancing smoothly enough but without the ease she had expected. There was something different about him tonight; something changed.

Her glance shot up to his eyes and found their clear dark hazel held neither flame nor demand. "I've been wondering why you made a special trip across the river, last night, just to ask me to the dance."

He smiled and looked over the heads of the dancers toward the officers' side of the room. And, at once, Iris knew he was searching for Pat Terry. He asked: "Why does any man ask a pretty girl to a dance?"

Iris said: "He might, if he was in your position where he heard all the post scandal as soon as it happened, know that the girl would be in for a bad time."

His smile disappeared. "Let's go outside where we can talk."

He steered a way through the crowd and led her to the end of the rickety porch where he found two battered chairs. He was silent for a long full minute. And, again she was conscious of the change in him; realized that he had moved away from her.

"I'm waiting," she said at last. "You were going to tell me why you crossed the river to ask me to the dance. Or maybe you intended to explain how much of the latest post gossip you'd heard."

"Guess I heard it all within a few hours. It's rotten, but tonight I got a new angle. Iris, you're a lovely girl and shouldn't get—mixed up."

"*Tonight* you 'got a new angle'?"

"Yes. You shouldn't have come to the dance alone. After what happened—the fight between Moylan and Sandy Varnum—it would have been better to stay away. You'll have to give people a chance to forget the thing but by walking in here, alone, dressed as if you were going to a city ball—"

"I made them decide I was a hussy,"

she broke in, and stirred uneasily as the heavy warmth of the night pressed down.

"I wasn't going to put it that way. Still, you ought to be careful for a while. If you're quiet and inconspicuous, the scandal will blow over. After all, an army post has to have certain rules."

"I see." She moved again, away from the clutching heat, and laughed. His words were an echo of Colonel Terry's statements. And he had been dancing with Pat.

"Do you think it's funny?" he demanded.

She was silent. Suddenly she started out of her chair as the heavy, warm atmosphere changed. As abruptly as a gunshot, the world had become still and the air had died, leaving invisible flame in its place.

"Listen," she said. "Don't you feel that? It's the—sirocco!"

He swung up to his feet, his sinuous body poised. "You're right. Another one. This may be worse than the first. Wait here, I'll get someone to take you home."

"Where are you going?"

He turned back, hesitated, and then said: "To find Pat Terry. I have to be sure she's safe before the storm hits."

Iris nodded and as he hurried away, told herself: *Of course. She's the answer to his lecture and to the change in him.*

Iris walked along the porch, through the invisible, still fire which burned through her skin and into her lungs. The railing felt hot as she hurried down the steps.

N THE ground, she turned unhesitatingly East, away from her home, and started toward the river. She moved quickly, holding up her skirts with both hands, feeling as if the churning black waters ahead were actually calling to her.

The wind struck before she could reach the bank. It was a blast of fiery lightening, so fierce that she swayed and almost fell. Her breath was thrust back into her throat and she knew that she could not remain on her feet for long.

"The barracks," she remembered, and began to run.

She was exhausted when the door of the abandoned building finally opened under her desperate thrust. Closing it required the last of her strength and then she staggered to one of the bunk platforms.

She did not know whether it was minutes or hours later that the door opened again and slammed shut. She sat up dazedly. "You—" she said.

Captain Sandy Varnum nodded and sprawled on a bare bunk while he fought breath back into his body. When he could speak, he said: "I was outside the recreation hall and saw you leave."

"Outside—why?"

"To see you, to look after you, maybe. I didn't go in because you'd told me to get out of your life."

"Strange that the storm brings us together."

"Not at all. Storm is part of life and it's life that's bringing us together."

Iris stared at him, into eyes which were the gray of fog and held the glow of a far, angry sky. She said: "This is an army post and you're an officer. No one here would ever forget—"

He left the bunk platform and walked toward her, his stride unhurried. Taking her hands, he drew her up to her feet. "You're exaggerating. There are lots of other army posts and army assignments. You'd probably be surprised if you knew how many of the high-nosed, proper wives of officers were once housemaids or dance-hall girls. In another post you'd only have to be completely arrogant and everyone would accept you as a society girl."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm asking you to marry me, Iris. We don't have to stay at Fort Minter."

"But—"

He released her hands and took her, almost roughly, into his arms. "Women are serious about the wrong things," he said.

And bending, he took her lips in a kiss which stopped her pulses for a long second which stretched out to the edge of pain. The second was followed by the fierce lift of her heart and a dancing, singing drive in her blood.

Finally, she drew back to see his face. "Are you sure? Can you be sure?"

"No. No one's sure of anything, but I know we have to try. We can't escape each other now—and we'll never want to."

He kissed her again, and, with the increasing pressure of her own lips, Iris knew that even being sure of the future was not important.

THE END

TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS RECIPES

★ ★ ★

Make this Holiday Season a memorable one, not only for gifts and good fellowship, but also for the delicious food you serve.

CHRISTMAS is essentially the Holiday of Home, when you think of firesides, of family groups, of hospitality for the stranger who may be far from his own home, and of human kindness expressed in personal effort. But don't forget that the Yuletide is also the time to hang a sprig of mistletoe on a convenient chandelier or doorway. Any lady caught beneath the cluster of berries may be kissed without offense—and many a lasting romance has been kindled by this first Christmas kiss.

Certain types of entertainment and food have become traditional, not only on the Eve and Day of Christmas, but for the entire Holiday season, including New Years Day. Whether you are at home or living temporarily in some camp, you can prepare something, if only some particular drink, that is universally associated with Christmas.

The Wassail Bowl probably dates farthest back in Yuletide history. This is most often served on Christmas Eve. The first recipe is the most modern and most easily prepared. These particular directions are in popular use in many parts of our country, but the following recipe was given me by a ranch cook in Arizona.

WASSAIL No. I. Prepare a cheesecloth bag in which to tie 12 whole cloves, 6 allspice, 1 tablespoon of ginger, and 1 six-inch stick of cinnamon. Put 4 cups of water and 2 cups of sugar in a kettle, add the spice bag, cover and simmer for ten minutes. Turn the heat off. Cover kettle and permit to stand until contents are cold. Remove the spice bag and add 1 quart of orange juice, 1 cup of lemon juice and 1 quart of cider. Put crushed ice or cubes in glasses, fill ⅔ full of the Wassail, then add enough ginger ale to fill the glass. This is a nice drink for use when children are present.

WASSAIL No. II. This recipe follows the old traditional recipe and was obtained from two different sources, one in Colorado where the drink had been prepared by three generations, and the second from Montana. Each of the recipe donors declared the original directions came from New England. To make this Wassail, heat 1 quart of ale to the boiling point. Into it stir a small amount of grated nutmeg and powdered sugar with the peel of 1 lemon. While the ale is heating, not too fast, beat up 3 eggs with 4 ounces of previously moistened sugar. Put the hot ale into the beaten sugar and eggs in one pitcher, and into another pitcher put a quart of old rum or brandy. Pour the mixture back and forth from one pitcher to the other until it is smooth; then pour unto a holly-wreathed "Wassail Bowl". All containers should be heated before using as the drink must not become tepid before serving. More than one batch should be made if the quantity is not sufficient or you wish to repeat servings.

HOT RUM PUNCH is excellent for serving on cold holidays, where the air is filled with frost. Take the juice of 3 lemons, the grated rind of 2 lemons, and ½ pint of brandy. Add 1½ cups of rum, 1

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cup of white sugar, 1 quart of hot water and nutmeg to taste. Let simmer for two minutes and serve piping hot.

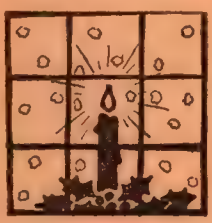
There are two Christmas Cakes popular in the Southwest that I believe are especially nice, either for serving at a mealtime or during the evening at a Holiday buffet supper.

CHRISTMAS CAKE. Put ½ a pound of butter and ½ a pound of granulated sugar in a basin and place near the stove to soften. Put through a sieve three times 1 pound of flour and ¼ ounce of baking powder. Add to the flour ½ pound of seedless raisins and ½ pound of currants. Cut into shreds 6 ounces of candied peel and mix with the fruit and flour. Beat the butter and sugar until creamy, then add 4 eggs, one at a time and beating thoroughly after each egg. When all are well blended, add the flour and fruit mixture and moisten to the usual cake batter consistency with milk. This may be baked in two or more cakes as desired and will make four pounds.

CHILDREN'S CHRISTMAS CAKE. ...seems to have come to us by way of Mexico. Cream ½ cup of butter or shortening with ¾ cup of granulated sugar. Beat well. Add 6 egg yolks and beat until the batter is smooth. Then add ¾ teaspoon of vanilla or lemon extract. Sift 1¼ cups of flour with 2 teaspoons of baking powder and ½ teaspoon of salt. Add to the first mixture alternately with ½ cup of milk. Pour the batter into an oiled ring mold and before placing in oven, put into the batter a tiny porcelain doll or other toy. Bake in a moderate oven for thirty minutes. Cover with a plain white icing and decorate with a wreath of whole or glazed fruit.

INDIVIDUAL PUMPKIN OR SQUASH PIES are a very excellent Christmas or New Years dessert because they are tasty and easily made. Rub 2 cups of steamed or baked pumpkin or squash through a sieve. Add 1 cup of sugar, ½ teaspoon of salt, ½ teaspoon of ginger and 1½ teaspoons of cinnamon. Stir in 1 pint of milk and 2 lightly beaten eggs. Line individual pie tins with crust, pour in the filling and bake in a moderately slow oven. Serve with whipped cream if possible, or sprinkle chopped nuts over the top.

PLUM PUDDING of true old-fashioned deliciousness may be made as follows: Mix together, thoroughly, 8 ounces of moist sugar, 8 ounces of finely chopped suet, 8 ounces each of seedless raisins and dried currants. Add 4 ounces of shredded, mixed candied peel; 4 ounces each of flour and bread crumbs; 2 ounces of blanched and shredded almonds, and the grated rind of 1 lemon. Beat 3 eggs and add 1 teaspoon of grated nutmeg and ½ teaspoon of salt. Stir into dry ingredients; then add ¼ of milk and a small glass of brandy. (Omit the latter if you like). Turn the mixture into two well-greased basins or pudding dishes and steam for five to six hours.



ROAST TURKEY has always been most popular for Christmas dinner. If possible, procure a hen turkey. Rub well with salt and pepper inside and out. Then rub the inside with ½ tablespoon of butter. Choose a stuffing that is not too highly seasoned and fill first the place from which the craw was removed. In there is a slit, which should be sewed up or fastened with a small skewer. Then stuff the main body of the turkey. Tie the legs together and bind the wings against the body. Rub the turkey lightly with vegetable shortening or butter, or lay a thin sliver of bacon over the top. Put a small amount of water in the pan and baste frequently with the juice from the turkey and the water. Allow about fifteen minutes to the pound. If you use a covered roaster, have heat high until breast browns lightly, then reduce. Basting is not necessary in this case.

A very excellent dressing is made in the following manner. Choose a large bowl or basin for the mixing and break up twice as much dried bread as you imagine you will require to fill the turkey. Fry 1 pound of sausage brown and crisp, drain, break into pieces and add to the bread. Peel and blanch ¾ of a pound of chesnuts, break into bits and add to bread and sausage. Chop 2 handfuls of peeled onions fine. When you are ready to stuff bird, add enough boiling water to the above mixture to moisten it sufficiently to handle nicely.

Flavor with salt, pepper and sage, going light with the latter.

About twenty minutes before serving, boil the gizzard and heart. Chop into small pieces, removing the skin and pieces of membrane. Chop the liver after blanching in boiling water for a full minute. When you have placed the turkey on a platter and set where it will keep warm, pour off the liquid left in pan until there are about 2 tablespoons left. Blend in 1 rounded tablespoonful of flour, then put back slowly the liquid you have drained off with enough hot water to make gravy of the required thickness. Stir constantly while bringing to a boil. Add chopped giblets and serve.

ROAST DUCK is a good substitute for a turkey if you have few to serve or a small place to prepare your dinner. Wash the duck, removing pin feathers and singeing with care. Be certain that the inside has been thoroughly cleaned. Fill with a prune stuffing. Tie the tail carefully with a long string and fasten to crossed drumsticks. Dredge with flour, salt and pepper and place in hot oven for thirty minutes. Reduce heat to moderately slow and finish roasting, allowing thirty minutes to the pound. Baste three times during final half hour of cooking.

COLD RUM PUNCH is an excellent and convenient drink for large parties, especially if there are young people. Rub 12 lumps of sugar against the outside of fresh oranges until the sugar is permeated with the oil of the fruit. Take 1 cup each of orange, lemon and canned pineapple juice, and add 3 cups of Jamaica rum (Do not substitute here). Then add 4½ cups of pale dry ginger ale and 1½ cups of carbonated water. The sugar should be dissolved in the fruit juice. If you like, when the drink is mixed you may add a small amount of crushed pineapple. Pour over a cake of ice in a punch bowl. This amount will supply thirty servings.

RED CHERRY PUNCH may be served any time during the Holidays and is sure to make a hit. Combine 1 cup of boiling water with 1½ cups of sugar. When dissolved add 1 quart of pitted *red* cherries and their juice, 1 cup of orange juice and ½ cup of lemon juice. Chill in ice box for four to five hours. Then pour into a punch bowl, add 1 quart of muscatel or malaga wine, 1 quart of sweet claret and 1 quart of charged water. Serve at once.

FROSTED RASPBERRY GOBLET is good for everyone, and is especially nice for the youngsters who may be with you at your Christmas party. For this take 1 pint of sweetened raspberry juice, the juice of 3 limes, 1 pint of charged water and 1 pint of raspberry sherbet. Combine in a cocktail shaker, mix well and serve in small goblets.

PRUNE STUFFING. Mix together 2 cups of chopped prunes, 2 cups of salt, ¾ of a cup of cold crumbs. Add 1 teaspoon of chopped apples and 3 cups of stale bread-water and ¼ teaspoon of grated nutmeg. Fill cavity of duck and fasten securely. This dressing is also good in roast goose and can be used with pork roasts to good advantage.

LUCKY TREE CAKE is an old-fashioned recipe that makes a charming feature for a Yuletide engagement party. It is merely a large jellyroll cake, decorated with chocolate icing and bits of candied citron to simulate a tree. It should be bordered with Roman numerals eteched in chocolate. The bride-to-be cuts the cake, and as each person receives a numbered piece, he reaches into a gift bag and presents a cellophane-wrapped gift with a corresponding number. The gifts are brought by the guests, numbered and placed in the gift bag ahead of time.

The keynote of any Christmas dinner or refreshments should be simplicity, but the food should be hearty and tempting. Avoid hurrying around at the last minute by baking your cake ahead of time and making the dressing for the turkey or duck the previous day. Then you can stuff the bird the night before and have it all ready to pop into the oven—and enjoy Christmas Day in a real holiday mood.

"On Christmas be merry, and thankful withal,
And feast thy poor neighbor, the great with the small."

LADY IN SCARLET

FORGET ranch problems for a while," Phil Norde told his beautiful boss. "I came to talk about you."

Verity smiled, her lips warming. "You look as if you're about to say—again—that there's too much female interference with your work—"

"Never mind the rest of it," Phil cut in. Sitting beside the desk, the big blond foreman leaned toward Verity. "I just want to get things straight. After last night—"

Verity stirred sharply, and her glance moved to the large portrait on her ranchhouse wall.

The portrait came to disturbing life, and Verity told herself: *I'll have it taken down tomorrow.* But she had made that decision many times—and the painting still remained.

The painting was of a girl wearing a scarlet shawl which was wrapped so that her body proudly proclaimed itself, demanding admiration of fine legs and delicate knees; of pliant waist and vitally moulded flesh. The young shoulders were bare but the white skin was touched with a reddish sheen reflected from the scarlet shawl. The mouth was at once the mouth of a child and of a woman who made her own rules. The vermilion warmth and taut freshness of the lips were gayly asking while behind their challenge was a primitive shadow.

The girl's hair, also holding the red glow, was molten copper. But the eyes had escaped all trace of the artist's scarlet brush. They were darkly blue.

The picture was of Verity and had been painted by an artist-saddletramp from Colorado.

Phil Norde raised his eyes to the painting. "I heard about that picture less than a week after I took the job here—and also about the man who painted it. The story dildn't mean anything then—but it does now. . . . This artist hombre—who was he?"

Verity's eyes lost some of their dark-blue depths. "I *think* his name was Wyck. Yes—Fred Wyck."

"And he worked for you. How'd that happen?"

Her shoulders moved impatiently but the stillness on her face had become a mask. "How do we 'happen' to get most of our American riders? He'd been painting and working his way through the West. Finally he wandered into Mexico and came here looking for a job. I hired him."

Phil asked: "Then he painted a picture of you—painted *that* and left?"

She nodded. "But Phil, you didn't come to talk about my portrait?"

"No," he said slowly. "When we parted last night you said you'd send word—let me know where I stood."

The girl's smile was uncertain. "How can I let you know if I'm not—sure?"

His eyelids pushed together. "I've been here for six months."

"But that's just it! Phil, until last night I hadn't thought or believed—" she stopped in confusion and bright color spread across her cheeks. Verity was thinking of the artist-saddletramp who had loved her, painted her—and disappeared into nowhere.

"Verity," Phil said and reached for her hands, drawing her out of the chair.

A tiny signal of alarm pealed through her mind but Phil's hands were tightening on her wrists. His hands moved from her wrists to her shoulders to bring her closer. And her pulses were obediently creating a storm which grew until her eyes were as primitive as smothered fire.

As Phil's blond head bent and as her hands went up to his face, Phil knew that Verity was evading his question with a kiss. His mouth found the acceptance of hers but even as fire ignited between their lips his determination hardened into angry force.

Verity suddenly turned cool in his arms. But before she could free herself, she knew there was someone in the room watching them. Her primitive instincts had discovered an unseen presence. Her thoughts fled to the painting—and to the artist-saddletramp who had disappeared. . . .

The complete story of Verity, her foreman and the vagabond artist will be told by Marian O'Hearn in—"Night Is for Stealing Kisses"—in the next issue. February RANGELAND ROMANCES—published Dec. 27th.

The Editor.

NO KISSES FOR LADY SHERIFFS

By Anthony Alger

CHLOE YARNELL turned before the mirror in Allie Winthrop's Dressmaking Parlors at Uttley's Corners. Chloe was a big, beautiful girl, whose dark-brown hair never needed a curler and whose blue eyes were as level and serene as the small lake at the edge of the village. There was nothing hurried or nervous about her, and, one surmised at once, nothing petty or frivolous.

She eyed critically the garment Allie had just finished, although at other times Chloe wasn't hard to suit. But this was the first "divided skirt" west of the Rockies, and Chloe was just a little skeptical. Courage would be needed to wear it, for nobody for miles around missed the slightest thing that Chloe Yarnell did these days. But she was in drastic need of some garment that would let her sit astride of a horse.

"It will be quite all right," Allie assured her, moving a number of pins from her mouth to the front of the cotton dress. Although Allie made all the "good dresses" worn by the women in that district, she was still young and pretty.

"It wouldn't have been in Godey's Lady's Book if it wasn't," Allie supplemented. "And my sister in Pennsylvania wrote me only last winter that she had seen one near Germantown."

Allie was usually smiling, and her scant blond hair was always "frizzed." She was quick and fussy and nervous, and her tongue never rested. She called it being friendly and thought that her business success depended on not letting the conversation lag.

In her way Allie Winthrop held a brave front to the world. She made her own living without the help of father or brother—or husband—and that was something those days.

"It looks awful," Chloe remarked, but was quick to add: "Not your work—I didn't mean that. You've done a fine job on a hideous style. Anyway, I won't be falling off a side-saddle every time I get into a tight place."

"Nor twisting your spine, I should think, when you need to be on a horse all day. I'm sure you're going to like it, Miss Chloe."

People had taken to calling her Miss Chloe since the very day she had taken over her father's office, whereas Chloe had been good enough before. Everybody had a changed attitude toward her, the young men in particular. And as for Lafayette Slaughter, who had been "courting" her, he had lost heart the same day he had the courtroom tilt with Sheriff Silas Yarnell that had ended with the judge sending Silas to jail for contempt of court.

Lafayette didn't mind seeing Chloe's father go to jail; it was the fact that Chloe had been sworn in as the old man's deputy that was too much for him.

Chloe herself hadn't wasted any heartache on Lafayette. She believed too thoroughly in her father. She soon saw that Lafayette was going to make it as hard for her as he could. Indeed, it was he who had determined her on the divided skirt.

One of her errands as sheriff had been a visit to Tyee Jim at the Indian village, now deserted by all the natives except Jim, the chief, and his brother. Chloe knew that Lafayette and a number of other young men had been bent on ousting Tyee Jim's tribe from the rich lands on which they had lived long before the white men came. She had

As sheriff, beautiful Chloe had to oust Indian Tyree Jim from his rich land—even though it meant blazing guns . . . and handcuffs for the man whose kiss she couldn't forget.

He whispered against her lips: "You minx! You ought to be blushing. . . ."

ridden over to hear what Jim had to say as an excuse for not moving to the Indian reservation.

At first the chief grunted in disgust at having to parley with a squaw, even though she was white. When he did consent to talk he opened up a long guttural harangue about the rights of his people, and it was already twilight when Chloe, swaying in her side-saddle, turned back through the forest. She was puzzled, and, in spite of the pistol strapped to her waist, anxious.

All along Chloe had managed to appear more sure of herself than she felt. Her wide white brow made her look calm. She had her father's steadiness and she was more even tempered, perhaps because she hadn't been years dealing with outlaws and rascally Indians.

She hadn't gone far on her ride back to Uttley's Corners before she encountered Lafayette Slaughter, tall, lanky, red haired and loose jointed, the sort who would grow stringy like red rawhide in a few years.

"Well, if it isn't the Lady Sheriff. Been out making an arrest? Fellow get away? Need any help?" He hurled everything at her at once, as he juggled for a position on the trail which would force her to rein in. He edged his horse shoulder to shoulder with hers.

"I don't need any help yet," Chloe said. "You see that Tyee Jim moves to the reservation, and we're with you to a man. Without your having to turn your lily-white hand."

Before Chloe could think up the tactful reply she knew was needed, Lafayette took her by surprise. He reached out his long arms and tried to kiss her. He must have been trying to stiffen his own courage, for he had never kissed her before. Chloe's horse shifted, and Lafayette's lips landed on her cheek.

A disagreeable thrill ran over her. She might have liked Lafayette once. But she had never been in love with him, and this was too much. She kicked at her horse's sides to make him carry her beyond Lafayette's reach.

The horse responded, but Lafayette held onto her. To Chloe's great chagrin she was unseated and went sprawling to the ground.

Evidently the sight of the dignity of a sheriff being so easily upset was too much for the slight act Lafayette possessed. He guffawed, slapped his thigh, and hadn't the sense to apologize nor to help her up.

But Chloe was athletic, and she was quickly back on her horse, her face burning and her eyes blazing. How helpless she would be if she should encounter trouble!

"Of all the silly doings—turning a lady into a sheriff," he chuckled. "Why didn't they appoint me?"

Chloe didn't bother to answer. As her horse carried her swiftly toward home, she took out her handkerchief and rubbed at the spot where Lafayette's lips had wet her cheek.

SHE WAS still thinking about him as she paid for the divided skirt. She wondered how she could ever have tolerated him. If it hadn't been for Lafayette her father wouldn't be in jail today. Neither would she be striding forth from Allie Winthrop's in the nearest thing to a pair of trousers that a woman dared wear. It was already late spring and the time when a girl's thoughts turned to dimity and sprigged muslin. Chloe sighed.

Last night she had worn a spring dress at a party, a light-blue mull which Allie had recently made for her. It had ruffles all up and down the long skirt, and a white lace fichu about the shoulders. She had ordered it for this special party while she was only the sheriff's daughter. Lafayette had been going to escort her, but after that tiff on the way back from Tyee Jim's she didn't suppose he would come for her. At least she hoped he wouldn't.

She was still girl enough not to want to give up the really big party of the spring that always opened the dancing pavilion on the lake's edge, and she had gone with the judge and his wife. The judge had expressed himself as sorry that Silas Yarnell had to "act up" the way he did, giving the judge no choice but to maintain the decorum of his court-room. He had said he would help Chloe in any way he could, and thus they were the best of friends.

She knew that she looked as pretty as she ever had in the days when everybody called her Chloe easily and naturally. But she sensed that the young folks couldn't quite bridge the void that now lay between her and them. They left her to sit with the judge and his wife, and Chloe began to

wonder if she had aged suddenly. Until she became aware of Anson Hargrove, whom she had never seen before.

The judge had got her up for the Virginia reel, and down at the opposite corner of the set was this strange good-looking man. Allie Winthrop was his partner, and evidently she had him in tow. It would be like Allie, Chloe thought, to get in with the latest comer, putting herself forward in her friendly, rattle-brained way.

Anson hadn't brought Allie, however. Allie had come with the older woman who helped her in the shop. And when Lafayette Slaughter edged into the hall later, with somewhat the sideways gait of a crab, Allie seized upon him. It had been remarked around Uttley's Corners for some time that Allie was "sweet on" Lafayette. This evening she had a grand time, fancying that at last she was attracting him away from Chloe.

But Chloe was kept busy by the new man. Anson didn't seem able to take his eyes off her. That made Chloe feel a lot better. She even forgot that it wasn't good manners to devote too much time to any one man. This man wasn't afraid of her, even though he must have heard that she was the Lady Sheriff.

At first impression one thought of Anson Hargrove as a good-looking dare-devil, brown eyed and sandy haired. At the very least, one saw that he was eager and full of fun. And where Chloe was concerned he was daring enough. He even started a game of forfeits in which he managed to kiss her. And it was a real kiss, square on the lips.

She was too surprised to resist. Besides, wasn't it better to pass it off in the way it was meant, in a spirit of play? But Chloe trembled, her cheeks grew pink and her steady eyes sparkled. For no reason at all it made her think of a still spring day when she had stood in an apple orchard in full bloom. A quick gust of wind had shaken the loosening flowers over her in a flood of scented beauty. This sensation was similar.

The party went on. Later when Chloe happened to be sitting next to Allie Winthrop, she judged from Allie's chuckles that she was struggling with a bit of gossip too good to keep.

"He won his bet all right," Allie soon chortled. "Oh my!"

"Who?" Chloe asked.

"That new Mr. Hargrove. The boys were raking him about his success with the Lady Sheriff, and he made a bet with them that he would kiss you before the evening was over."

"Oh!" said Chloe, over an awful hollowness. "I don't think it was very kind—of any of them."

* * *

But that had been last night. This morning in front of Allie Winthrop's Dressmaking Parlors, Chloe set her foot in the stirrup and threw her leg across the horse's back, a trick she had learned in childhood. The gray wool skirt fell on either side of the horse and was supposed to disguise the fact that its wearer had legs.

She sat erect, her gray jacket buttoned closely and her head held high as she rode down the street of Uttley's Corners. She was going again to Tyee Jim's.

She had repeated to her father what the Indian chief had told her.

Silas Yarnell, locked in his own jail, had said: "Yes, honey, I know. But you and me didn't make the law. All we got to do is enforce it."

Silas was heavy set, ruddy, blond and six feet tall. He was nearing sixty and wore his beard long. It was streaked with reddish strands, and there was more of the same color in the bushy eyebrows above light eyes that held a defiant look.

"But you, yourself, talked up to Lafayette Slaughter," Chloe reminded him.

"I did, certain sure. Because he was trying to horn in and get that land for himself. You keep your eyes peeled, child, for doings like that. Not that I like to have you do it. Some days I feel like tearing this flimsy jail apart with my two hands."

And all the time Chloe had the keys in her pocket, and he could have taken them and walked out if he wanted to. But that wouldn't have been in keeping with the Yarnell honor.

So, Chloe was going to the Indian village to argue once more, before she gave the word to the self-interested and willing young citizens who were eager to act as her posse. But when she arrived there she encountered a new factor.

Last night no one had appeared to know much about Anson Hargrove or what his business might be in Uttley's Corners, but

here he was this morning standing before the Indian huts with Tyee Jim.

CHLOE felt dazed. The memory of what he had done at the party dyed her cheeks. He had kissed her to win a bet, and she had all but made a fool of herself. He might at least have refrained from acting as if he really liked her.

Anson was smiling, and Chloe thought through her confusion that she had never seen anyone who looked so pleasantly courageous. Physical courage was common enough among the settlers. They could hardly have got so far west without it. But Anson had some sort of mental courage as well that could smile at difficulties—and at lady sheriffs. His good looks impressed her again, but he himself didn't seem conscious of that advantage.

He came up to where she still sat her horse. He stroked the animal's neck while he pleaded Tyee Jim's cause. According to Anson, the Indians were within their rights in refusing to move.

"How does it come you're interested?" she asked, her resentment flowing out of her like sand from an hour-glass.

"I read a little law back home, before I got the fever to come West."

"You're a lawyer?"

"Not a real one. I hope to be a farmer."

"I know some would-be farmers around here who take a different stand. They want to get Tyee Jim's land."

"I hope I don't have to get my land that way. I'm not too lazy to look further for it."

Chloe heard him out, her sheriff's star glinting on her jacket. Her sweet mouth was unsmiling and her eyes were troubled.

"What you say about Tyee Jim's rights may be true," she said finally. "But, you see, I have to enforce the law. The law says these people must go."

"The law isn't through with the matter yet."

"They have only until tomorrow noon," Chloe insisted. "I came to warn Tyee Jim for the last time. There's no sense in his holding out against something that can't be helped. All the other Indians have had the good sense to go. Tyee Jim and his brother will have to move their families out to the reservation, too."

Anson's eyes flashed. He stopped fondling her horse. "So that Lafayette Slaughter can seize their land? Is that what you're intent on?" There was a hint in those words that he had heard about Lafayette's having been a suitor of hers.

Chloe's chin went up and her level blue eyes looked squarely at him. "I have no interest in that at all." She turned to Tyee Jim, who, arms folded, stood back of Anson. "You have heard," she said to the Indian chief.

She whirled her horse and started back at a lively canter. She knew that hoof-beats followed her, and over her shoulder she saw that Anson Hargrove was bent on overtaking her. But she was already within sight of the lake before she made up her mind to check her horse.

"Tyee Jim won't go," Anson told her. "I didn't want to say so back there, but he'll fight."

"That means we'll have to fight, too," said Chloe, her lips setting in a straight line.

"But couldn't you let matters rest until we can hear from Washington?"

"That takes months."

"Months have passed already since the Indians sent in their appeal. A reply should come any day now. It may be on its way up from Portland at this moment."

Chloe hesitated. She didn't relish what would have to be her part in this affair.

"You have a good excuse," Anson urged. "No one could say anything if you put if off until your father is out. Let him handle it—it's no job for a girl."

"I have to forget that I'm a girl."

He laid his hand on her arm. "I don't like it at all. You're far too lovely— "

What was there about Anson Hargrove to affect her so—that her skin should burn from his mere touch, that the sternness in her which had been so hard to build up should turn as soft as butter?

"You ought to be loved and taken care of," he was saying. "I wish I had that privilege—"

"I have had my chances."

"But you haven't taken them. That means—?"

"I've had my father. No girl could be anxious to leave a father like mine."

"And maybe the right man hasn't come along. Unless I should be that man." His

horse moved closer to rub his nose along the glossy neck of Chloe's mount. Anson threw his arm about Chloe's shoulders and kissed her swiftly. "I know I'm a bold man. But you're—you turned my head, that's all."

"And so you want to turn mine," said Chloe, feeling that he was succeeding. For the moment he made her forget everything, even duty, so warm and delightful was the confusion he set up in her. She forced herself to draw away. "But it won't do."

"I can't help it if I've fallen in love with you."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. At least you can refrain from kissing me when there's no bet to be won."

She saw him turn red, and her heart sank, for no reason at all except a silly hope that he could deny it.

He had the good sense not to try. "No, there wasn't any bet to be won today. How could I have known last night—at the party—that it was going to be like this? That once I did kiss you—"

But Chloe couldn't get over the injury to her pride. If he had only been sincere about that first kiss, it would have been a memory to hold to for as long as she lived. Girls treasured things like that, as they pressed flowers between the pages of books. But to have been the butt of a joke!

Chloe sent her horse headlong down the path and left Anson sitting his at the lake's edge, looking after her. Oh, why did it have to be this way? Why did Anson Hargrove have to set himself against her?

WHEN she got home Lafayette Slaughter was waiting for her. She dismounted in front of the plain board house and fastened the reins about the hitching rail. The gray wool skirt was hot and clumsy about her legs in the warm spring day. She pulled off her hat as she crossed the board walk, and her lovely brown curls sprang into softness about her face.

She didn't ask Lafayette into the sitting-room, as she would have done in former days. She seated him in her father's office, a bare room furnished only with a high-topped desk, a table and several hard-bottomed chairs. A few faded chromos on the walls set forth events in the nation's history.

"Well," Lafayette began, "is Tyee Jim going peaceable?"

"I'm afraid not," sighed Chloe. "But I've warned him to be out by tomorrow noon."

"We're with you, you understand."

She nodded. She sat down before the desk and pushed some papers aside without seeing them. "I was just wondering—couldn't we wait a few days longer, till another mail has a chance to get in?"

"No!" Lafayette thundered, standing up. "That's just what we don't want to do! You're the sheriff, and you've got to see that this thing is put through on time."

Chloe dreaded to have it said that she was a weakling, to have her sex flung in her face. She was determined to do anything her father would have carried out. The stand of Lafayette and his friends didn't weigh as much with her personally as the attitude Anson Hargrove had taken. She wanted to show the newcomer that the Yarnells weren't triflers.

"All right," she returned wearily. "Have the men ready to ride over with me tomorrow."

Lafayette changed at once, ready to win her favor. "You know, Chloe, once I get that land, it's yours, too. You and me will get married." He came close, resting his hand on the desk's top.

It seemed to Chloe that he looked at her with a leer. She had never thought of his smiles in that way before.

She drew back. "No, Lafayette. I won't be interested. If I want land, I'll—I'll go where I don't have to take it from anybody else." She knew very well that she was quoting Anson. She had never thought about owning land before, but she recognized that his sentiments on the subject were her own.

"Who's taking it, I'd like to know? Where are you going to go that there won't be some shiftless Indian squatting on a stretch of land as big as Rhode Island—land that he can't possibly use?"

"But Tyee Jim has built a house and cultivated a patch of ground. His Indians raise a lot of vegetables. We even made a Christian of him. He was doing all right."

"And he'll be all right on the reservation. They'll be fed and taken care of. Left to themselves, you know these Indians are

starving whenever anything goes wrong."

He laid his bony hand on her shoulder. "Stop arguing, Chloe. You're going to be my wife, you know, and a man doesn't want a woman always putting in her say."

She shrugged his hand off. "I'm not going to marry you, Lafayette. Get that idea out of your head. Go along now. I've got work to do."

Chloe went out to the kitchen to prepare something to eat, and from the window there she saw Lafayette straggling over to Allie Winthrop's. Chloe smiled, thinking that Allie would soon console him. In a land where women were scarce and desirable to work around a man's house, sentiment wasn't apt to overwhelm a fellow like Lafayette Slaughter. Anson Hargrove, now—? When a man was so keen for adventure, you'd look for him not to be quickly satisfied with a substitute.

Chloe slept uneasily that night. She had been tempted to discuss with her father what Anson had said, but she dreaded to worry him. Silas Yarnell was taking his jail sentence hard enough as it was.

With this task before her, Chloe almost hated being a girl. She wished she hadn't been so ready to step into her father's job. But that job meant a lot to Silas Yarnell, as well as to her. She wouldn't back down at the first hard test.

Around noon next day some eight young citizens, in various rough garb, but all mounted and armed, appeared with Lafayette in front of the sheriff's office.

Chloe was already in her divided skirt and as she pinned on her star. She avoided Lafayette's hand and mounted her horse unaided. She knew that some of the men snickered as they watched her, but her frown silenced them as she rode out of town at the head of her posse.

As she had feared, she found that Tyee Jim and his brother had made no preparations to move their families. She also saw that Anson Hargrove was there again. The Indians stayed behind their walls while Anson came forth to talk for them.

Chloe's jaw set and she drew her pistol. "It's no use, Mr. Hargrove," she said. "For your own safety I'll have to arrest you for disturbing the peace, and for resisting the law." She got down from her horse, and took a pair of handcuffs from her jacket pocket as she approached Anson. She heard the click of pistols being cocked behind her.

Anson's glance swept the determined line of mounted men, and he turned a fiery red. "You needn't put those things on me."

"Sorry," she said, feeling her own face burning. It was terrible to have to treat a man you liked this way. You couldn't expect him ever to speak to you again. She slipped the manacles over his wrists and delivered him to one of the men.

She was too embarrassed and too nervous to be conscious of the fear that quaked within her. She went up to Tyee Jim's door and hammered on it with the butt of her pistol.

"Come on, Tyee Jim," she called. "We take care of you. Then, if big white father in Washington say so, we bring you back again. Right now you come along with us. Save much shooting may be."

A shot fired through the door was her answer.

"Get her away from here!" Anson's voice rang out. "You fellows mean to let a girl do your dirty work? Slaughter, you're the one—get her back here. You can handle three or four Indians, surely."

"That's right, Chloe," Lafayette said. "You're the authority, but we'll manage this."

TWO MEN took her by either arm and led her back to where Anson was being held. Chloe felt that she should resist, but she was too upset to do more than sputter. She saw Lafayette scrape up some trash, place it under the corner of the shanty and set fire to it.

Shots followed him as he scampered back to his horse. The men responded with a volley that riddled the roof.

"You want us to shoot you to pieces?" Lafayette yelled. "Come out peaceable, and we won't harm you."

The posse had dismounted and taken shelter behind broad-trunked trees. Layfayette also found a tree and waited.

The flames licked upward. The dry bark walls were merely tinder. The door opened and the Indians spilled out on each other's heels, Tyee Jim in the lead, raging and cursing.

"You put out fire!" he demanded. "I go

along with you, you save my goods. All I got in there."

"All right, Jim. Make everybody throw down their guns."

The men rushed into the blazing walls along with the Indians and rescued what few skins, food and untensils they could. Then they had the Indians get on their bony horses and set off with them for the reservation. Chloe rode last with her prisoner.

"I don't see why you treat me like this," Anson complained. "Can't you trust to a man's word?"

"Not in this case."

When later she rode into Uttley's Corners with Anson she felt as badly as he. She locked him up in the jail, the judge having refused to accept bail. Until things died down it was just as well, he told Chloe, to keep Anson and the Indians apart. If they felt they had a champion they might start a massacre or even an Indian war.

It now became Chloe's job to cook for Anson, as the sheriff fed all the prisoners. So far there had never been more than two or three at a time. She gave him as good as the others, and no better.

After she had fed Anson on the first night, Allie Winthrop appeared with a covered dish, and asked permission of Chloe to take it to him. Chloe burned with the slur. It amounted to a hint that she hadn't fed Anson well enough, but she let Allie in.

"Really such a nice young man," Allie chattered. "It seems a shame."

Chloe was forced to listen until she could have screamed. Allie could be friendly and sympathetic to Anson, but Chloe had her dignity as sheriff to maintain. Besides, feeling that he must resent the treatment he had received at her hands and the hurt to his masculine vanity, she scarcely dared to look at him.

Two days later the mail arrived, sent by river-boat and horseback from Portland. The packet contained the expected letter from Washington. It allowed Tyee Jim and a few other industrious and peaceable Indians to remain on their land.

Now the problem was reversed. Lafayette Slaughter had already moved into a cabin there, and Chloe's duty was to get *him* out.

Chloe went to the judge with the letter. His first act was to release Anson Hargrove. His next was to "commute" Silas Yarnell's sentence. Nobody liked to see Chloe have the job of ousting Lafayette. Besides, it wouldn't be good politics now to keep Silas locked up. The chance was that public sentiment would change.

Chloe hugged her father, breathed deeply in relief and went across the road to see Allie Winthrop.

"I want you to make me a nice summer dress out of Godey's Lady's Book," Chloe said. "And if you hear of anybody who can use a divided skirt, I'll make her a present of mine."

"We women will be women," Allie chuckled. "Isn't that so, Mr. Hargrove?"

The sun had been in Chloe's eyes, but now she made out Anson seated at a table in Allie's sitting-room behind the shop. He was finishing a cup of tea.

"Glad to hear it," he answered.

"The poor man was half starved," Allie explained. "Just getting out of jail and all. Jail, where by rights he hadn't ought to be. Only, he's so big hearted. Trying to protect even the Indians."

"It was too bad," Chloe agreed. "But I've heard it said that any man who

amounts to anything gets into jail at least once in his life."

"Maybe tomorrow my rival will be in," Anson countered. "That is, if Slaughter puts up a fight against your dad. He's likely to be in an ugly mood."

"It does seem Lafayette ought to keep that land," Allie put in. "An enterprising young man like that. Not that I know anything about the ins and outs of it. I guess I just can't help liking nice men. And they like me, too, don't they, Mr. Hargrove?"

Anson rose. "I'm going along as one of your father's posse, Miss Chloe. Did he tell you?"

"Don't get yourself shot," said Chloe. Her eyes searched him. He didn't seem to be holding it against her for the way she had needed to treat him. He must really be generous and understanding.

"It won't be you, anyhow," Anson said, with a tender glance. "It was too much, I can tell you, when you were in the path of those bullets."

Silas Yarnell was to set out next morning. Chloe was restless as she watched him making ready. She had to go along. She would use her divided skirt once more.

"Is it getting to be a habit?" Anson asked her. "Do you naturally hanker for the smell of gun-powder?"

"I'm going over to get Tyee Jim," she answered. "I can't bear to have him hold a grudge against me."

"She won't be needed at the Indian huts," Silas put in. "And surely Lafayette won't be fool enough to try to resist white men. If we were only poor helpless Indians it might be different."

SHERIFF Yarnell's estimate was the true one, as Chloe learned toward evening. She had needed to wait all those hours for Tyee Jim and the others to get their families and their goods together. She was riding back with them when Anson Hargrove met them on the forest trail.

"All right now, Tyee Jim," Anson declared. "You go along to your huts. I take Lady Sheriff to her home."

"How did you make out?" Chloe asked as soon as they had parted from the Indians.

"It wasn't hard. We caught Lafayette out in Jim's plowed land, gathering Jim's vegetables. We just read the law to him, and he was smart enough not to resist. He was mad, though, clear through."

"He would be. But Allie will be glad to comfort him."

"How about your doing your share of that?"

She shook her head, flushing. "Not I. I wouldn't think of cutting Allie out."

"I've observed you're not of a jealous disposition."

"Have you? When?"

"When Allie was feeding me those nice little tid-bits. Didn't that reflect on your cooking?"

"I don't worry about that. I was glad for you to have them."

"It's a good thing the judge let me out, or between the two of you I'd soon have weighed two hundred."

"Are you accusing me of giving you more than was coming to you?"

"No. I accuse you of giving me less. Not as a prisoner, but as a man. Now that you're no longer my jailer, you ought to make up to me for the injury to my pride. You ought to kiss me and make a fuss over me. And you're going to start in right now."

He leaned over in his saddle and drew her against him. Their horses made no objection to walking shoulder to shoulder.

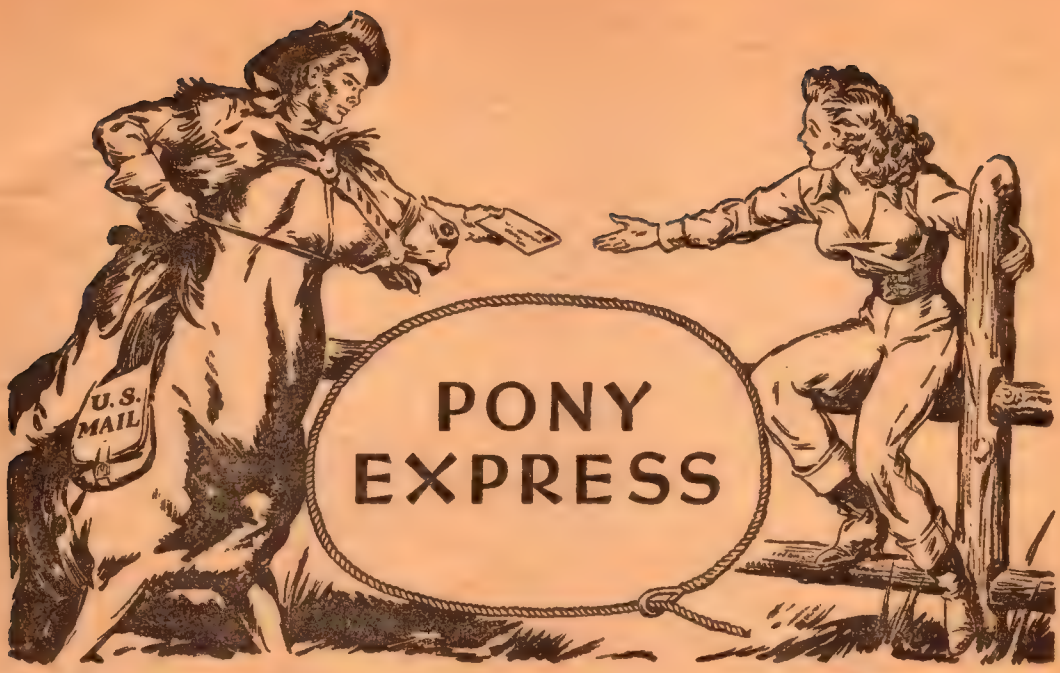
That time when Anson kissed her she kissed him back. It was such an agreeable atonement to make for the humiliation she had caused him, that the kiss was many times repeated, even after the woods grew too dark for them to read the love in each other's eyes.

When the lights of the houses at Uttley's Corners came into sight Anson had a suggestion: "Suppose you see Allie Winthrop right away and change that dress you ordered into a wedding gown."

Chloe laughed softly. "But the one I asked her to make will do very well to be married in. I had that in mind when I brought her over that piece of white silk Dad got for me last Christmas."

He whispered against her lips: "You minx! You ought to be blushing. . . . I hope you are."

"I probably am," said Chloe. "I'm happy enough."



Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Danny's Twin

Dear Editor:

After several unsuccessful attempts at crashing the Pony Express, I decided to try at least once more. I'm an old fan of RANGELAND ROMANCES and think it's a swell magazine.

I was discharged some time ago after four years in the Navy, and after seeing the "other side," I'd like to get acquainted with people closer to home. I'm six feet tall, have blond hair and blue eyes, and people say I resemble Danny Kaye a great deal. I'll write to anyone and exchange photos with all who write. I'm a camera bug, love the outdoors, movies, and just about anything.

I promise long and interesting letters to all who answer this. So come on guys and gals. I'll be waiting.

HARRY FOSTER
Cottage Hotel
Marion, Kansas

P.S. My nickname is "Foo."

Black-Haired Verna

Dear Editor:

Will you please print my plea for pen pals? I have just finished my first copy of RANGELAND ROMANCES and honest, it's really swell! From now on I won't miss a single copy!

I am 17 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, am 5 ft. 6 in. tall, and weigh 130 lbs. I am considered good looking; at least my friends tell me so.

I'm just an average American gal, who likes dancing, swimming, hiking, hunting and fishing. I live in the country and love the wide open spaces. I also like cooking, sewing, clothes designing, reading and writing letters.

My favorite hobby is writing poetry. I love all kinds of music but Western songs are my favorites. I am active in church work and 4-H Club activities. I am crazy about animals and have several pets.

So won't you boys and girls from far and near corners of the world sling some ink my way? I would especially like to hear from some honest to goodness cowboys and cowgirls, but anyone is welcome!

C'mon anyone from anywhere, regardless of age, race, color or creed—just write! You'll get an answer from me, just wait and see!

VERNA MOYER
R. D. 1, Box 62
Sch. Haven, Penna.

Let's Be Friends

Dear Editor:

Out here in the heart of the United States there is a girl that would like awfully well to have lots more friends to write to. So how about it all you guys and gals—won't someone give me a helping hand and help me to board the Pony Express?

I am 16 years old and have light brown hair and blue eyes. Writing letters is my favorite pastime, and I'll answer every letter that I receive. I'll exchange photos also.

Age makes no difference to me, as long as you are able to write. I would like to hear from a few of you servicemen who are overseas, if you have time to write.

My own personal theme song is "Let's Be Friends," so how about it—huh?

MARY DELORES COX
4433 West Central
Wichita, Kansas

Saxophones and Swimming

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your RR for a long time now, but have never had a chance to try for pen pals in your Pony Express. I would very much enjoy your publishing my plea for pen pals.

I am 5 ft. 5½ in. tall, have brown eyes and dark blonde hair, and weigh 128 lbs.

I live on Green Lake only one eighth of a mile (around the edge of the lake) from the National Music Camp. I would be glad to tell anyone all about the campus. I work there in the summer. I play the saxophone and like it very much. My parents own a resort.

I love to make new friends and everyone is welcome to write. Those in the service, too.

My favorite sports are dancing, roller skating, ice skating, and above all, swimming. I have been captain of a swimming team and belong to a roller skating club.

Come one, come all, and fill my mail box, won't you?

Your RR Pen Pal,
EVELYN MELVIN
Diamond Park
Bendon, Mich.

Outdoor Man

Dear Editor:

"Boots and Saddles"—this is my motto and watchword. Horseback riding is one of my first loves, as are hiking, fishing, camping and practically all outdoor sports. I also like to draw and sketch, and usually stick to Western subjects.

A few statistics: I'm seventeen years old, with brown hair and gray eyes, and am 5 ft. 8 in. tall. I would especially like to hear from cowboys and cowgirls who like to sketch and draw but, of course, everyone is welcome.

Come on, you Westerners, fill my saddlebags full with your letters.

Sincerely,
BOB SULLIVAN
233 West 28th St.
Norfolk 8, Va.

How About It, Gals

Dear Editor:

It is a short letter I'll write you, but is it possible that you can help me on an address of a girl, 26 years old, who would like to correspond with me?

I am a Dutch boy, 26 years old, and working in a publishing firm.

If you will do that for me, I am yours very thankfully.

BERT VAN RYSWYK JR.
85 Marco Polo Street
Amsterdam, W.
Netherland

Need a Pal?

Dear Editor:

Does anyone need a pen pal friend? I am 21 years old and have reddish light brown hair and gray eyes. I would like to hear from people who are lonely and don't get much mail. I will be a friend and true blue.

I live on a farm with my brother and parents. In my leisure time I like to write letters and draw Western pictures. I am willing to send anyone a picture or as many as possible along with my letters.

So come on and let *me* surprise some lonely mail box!

RUTH GILBERT
Rural Route No. 1
Weckerly Road
Monclova, Ohio

Golden-Haired Edith

Dear Editor:

I would like to make some pen pals, and I hope that the editors of RANGELAND ROMANCES will print my letter.

I am 14 years old, 5 ft. 5½ in. tall, weigh 130 lbs. (I'm quite slim), and have straight red-gold hair. I promise to answer all letters, and I also will exchange snapshots.

I live on a Wyoming Dude Ranch at the edge of the Big Horn Mountains. I enjoy many outdoor sports, but I like horses and horseback riding the best.

I hope that you will answer my request for pen pals.

EDITH TASS
Klondike Ranch
Buffalo, Wyoming

Here's "Deenie"

Dear Editor:

I am interested in lots and lots of pen pals. I am seventeen, a blonde with green eyes, and am 5 ft. 5 in. tall. My nickname is "Deenie".

My favorite type of amusement is dancing, and my favorite hobby is correspondence. I am interested in most all sports, especially football.

Come on, all you lads and lassies of the teen age, and write. I promise fast, prompt answers, and will exchange snapshots. The first to write will get the longest, most newsy letters.

NADINE BRITTINGHAM
1 Laurel St.
Pocomoke City, Maryland

Luck of the Irish

Dear Editor:

I've tried to get into the Pony Express before. Here's hoping I'll succeed this time.

I'm Irish, with red hair, blue eyes, and I'm 5 ft. 6 in. tall. You've heard of the luck of the Irish. Well, I'm hoping it'll hold for me and I'll receive hundreds of letters from kids all over the world.

I'll be happy to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with everyone.

I have a hobby which includes four things: (1) Drawing pictures of my friends. (2) Writing Western stories. (3) Writing poems for songs. (4) Last but not least, rushing down to the drugstore for my RANGELAND ROMANCES!

WANDA RIGGLE
1226 E. Fox St.
South Bend 14, Ind.

Just Waitin'

Dear Editor:

This is the second time I have tried to crash the Pony Express gates. The first time was to no avail. I just hope I have better luck this time.

I am the wife of a serviceman who is now

overseas, and I am very lonely. I would love to hear from other girls who, like me, are waiting for their husbands. I would also enjoy hearing from single girls, and I promise to answer every letter I receive.

My husband is a cowboy at heart, and I am an ardent horse lover. We both read RANGELAND ROMANCES and enjoy the stories very much.

I am 18 years old (will be 19 soon) and have brown eyes, reddish brown hair, and stand 5 ft. 6½ in. tall.

Please keep our mail-carrier busy bringing letters from all over the world.

MRS. MARY EVALINE TATE
128 South Draper St.
Shawnee, Okla.

Tall Tales—But True

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of your magazine and I think it is swell.

Could a fellow of 36, height 5 ft. 11 in., weight 150, and fancy free, join your club? Due to an illness I am not able to get around too much, so I get terribly lonesome.

I have been all over the good old U. S. A. Also the Orient, Mexico, Canada and other far off places. So I can tell some tall but true tales about my travels.

Men and women of all ages are welcome to write to me, so please publish this if possible.

JOHN C. PINKERTON
714 E. Coal
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Blue Eyes and Dimples

Dear Editor:

This is my second request for pen pals, so please publish this one for me as I am so lonesome. I had a car accident ten months ago and still can't walk. I know there must be boys and girls in hospitals and so on who would like to hear about our beautiful state.

I'm a very blonde girl with blue eyes and dimples. I am 5 feet. 5½ in. tall. I like to read RANGELAND ROMANCES, horseback riding, and I am a hillbilly singer. My favorite hobby is collecting songs. I like good movies and can do anything anyone else can do.

So come on, all you boys and girls from all around the world, and lend a poor girl some ink. I promise to pay it all back in some real interesting letters.

Just waiting,

ELSIE WILSON
General Delivery
Versailles, Mo.

Meet Gene McDougle

Dear Editor:

I hope you publish my letter for pen pals. I'm a boy of 14, with dark brown hair and eyes. I like all kinds of sports and also art. My hobbies are collecting stamps and bird eggs, also raising a colt.

I'd like to hear from girls and boys of any age from all over the world. I'll try to answer all letters and exchange pictures. So write!

GENE McDOUGLE
Arch, New Mexico

Spanish Senorita

Dear Editor:

Although I have read only two issues of RANGELAND ROMANCES, it is my favorite magazine, and I have promised myself not to miss one issue in the future.

I have an ardent desire for pen pals, and your Pony Express offers me a wonderful opportunity to let them form an idea of me, if this letter is printed as I am hoping.

I am a black-haired Spanish girl, brown eyes, 5 ft. 2 in. tall, in the first of the teens, have an olive complexion, and weigh about 102 lbs. I like all sports very much, and I am especially interested in art. I promise to answer all letters received. So come on, boys and girls around 13, and drop me a line or two.

RHINA HERRERA
1826 St. Paul St.
Baltimore 2, Md.

Therese With the Auburn Hair

Dear Editor:

I am an ex-service girl, 21 years old, with blue eyes and auburn hair. During the war I traveled quite a lot, but have missed meeting people since living in a strange town.

As I don't know very many people here, I get very lonesome, so I would like to have pen pals, anywhere, or any age. I can exchange many interesting and exciting experiences and can promise very amusing letters, as I am a writer.

THERESE J. SENBERG
Box 1791
Bridgeport, Conn.

Gold Star Mother

Dear Editor:

May I chat a while? Your magazine, RANGELAND ROMANCES, is tops. I hope I can find a place in your pen pal corner, as I have lots of time on my hands and it gets lonely.

I am 49, weigh 130 lbs. and have blue eyes and brown hair, and am 5 ft. 3 in. tall. I am a widow of a World War I veteran and a Gold Star Mother of this war. I should like to hear from anyone who will write to me.

CHARLOTTE ADAMS
317 Vine St.
Athol, Mass.

Talking Is Her Hobby

Dear Editor:

I am very hopeful that you will consider my plea for pen pals.

I am 15 years old, have brown hair, blue eyes, a light complexion, and my mother says my hobby is talking.

I quit school last year because of an operation. I have five sisters and three brothers and about 47 cousins. I would like to hear from anyone, especially servicemen, as I have a lot of relatives in the service and I know they get lonesome.

Sometimes I feel so lonesome I don't know what to do. So come on, guys and gals, and sling some ink my way.

HELEN BROWN
5 Nadine Place
Maplewood, E. St. Louis, Ill.

(Please continue on page 94)

THE GAME'S UP, DAN CUPID!

Pert sharpshooter Midge Parker had her sights trained on Sanford McBride's heart—and she had never missed her target . . . yet!

MIDGE PARKER stood before the crowd, indifferent to the admiring glances of the audience. She was a slender, beautiful and lonely figure. She was dreaming of tall, slow-talking, quick-tempered Sanford McBride.

"Step right up, Gentlemen," Jed Carson bawled. "One hundred dollars in gold to the man who can out-shoot the little lady!"

No man seeing her softly feminine figure, her provocative, elfin beauty imagined for a moment that she had uncanny skill with a pair of old dueling pistols. It made her the chief attraction of Jed Carson's wandering minstrel show.

But it was this skill that kept Sanford McBride from loving her. Midge was in love with him. She admitted it to herself with engaging honesty. But San didn't see her youth, the rebellious curls that kept showing under the broad brim of her Stetson, or the promise of love that danced in her eyes.

San either didn't see, or was indifferent to her. He'd made it very plain that Geraldine Bixton, Jed's new cashier, was the sort of girl he liked. Geraldine was a born flirt. A girl who wore long, flowing skirts no matter in what sort of country the show was traveling, who tossed her head gaily and stared boldly into the eyes of every man.

Midge straightened her slim shoulders and fingered the cool handles of her pistols. Jed had found three men eager to test their skill against hers. When the coins flashed briefly in the sunlight her aim did not waver, her hand was firm, her eye steady, and the coins disintegrated as if by magic.

"With all the men in the world," she told herself sternly, "why do you have to go mooning after that particular man? He isn't your type. He's just an end-man in a minstrel show."

There was no further time to worry about San for Jed was beside her. "Gosh, Midge," he grinned down at her. "You get fancier with that pistol every time!"

She smiled. "Thanks, Jed."

"You keep getting fancier looking, too. When are you going to say—yes?"

For a minute she looked steadily into his eyes. Jed was handsome; he was young and in love with her. He was the owner of the show. She ought to be in love with him. But she wasn't.

"I wish I knew," she replied honestly.

A shadow of concern crossed Jed's face. "Wish you'd hurry up, Midge. I'll sure save lots of money when you marry me. I won't have to pay your salary anymore!"

She laughed. Jed always made a joke of everything. That's what made him so successful. He kept people laughing.

"Come on," he urged. "Let's eat. Cookie's got everything ready, and I want to get out of town tonight."

Cookie was bending low over the gleaming coals. Once he had been a champion bronc buster, but age and a bad fall had reduced him to the chuck wagon. "Hi," he greeted her.

Midge wasn't paying much attention. She was watching to see if San would come in with Geraldine on his arm.

"When a pretty girl don't bother to say hello to you," Cookie reflected aloud. "It's usually 'cause she's jealous of someone."

Jed turned abruptly on his heel. "There ain't no cause for Midge to be jealous. She knows I got eyes only for her."

Cookie poked the fire gently. "Maybe she ain't jealous of you."

By Val Gendron

"I never made you any promise," she said slowly.

Sometimes, Midge thought angrily, Cookie talked too much—and saw too much.

"I'm not jealous of anyone," she declared loudly. A little too loudly.

Cookie settled back on his heeels. "A man's bound to think Geraldine's pretty. That's what she wants them to think."

Midge was aware that Jed was watching her closely, an intent, thoughtful expression in his eyes.

Cookie went on. "She looks at you with those sky-blue eyes of hers, and they say, *"Don't you think I'm beautiful?* Makes a man feel mighty good just to agree with those eyes." He rolled a cigarette in his short stubby fingers. "Why don't you give her some competition, Sugar?"

There was silence then beside the chuck wagon. Midge felt the color mounting to her cheeks. Jed was staring at her as if seeing her for the first time. Cookie, now that he had betrayed her secret, was innocently dishing up dinner.

She was heartily glad when the other members of the troupe joined them, laughing and chattering about the evening's performance. She was relieved, but at the same time conscious that neither San nor Geraldine had come in with the others.

She could close her eyes and see him perfectly. The tall, leanness of his figure. The sandy hair that curled boyishly on his head, the bland, hazel eyes, that looked as though he was always laughing. She couldn't be wrong about him. Everyone loved him, his gay, carefree manner, his gentleness to all living things. Even his hot temper, that flared momentarily at the slightest excuse, was somehow endearing.

MIDGE was almost through eating when they came in. Geraldine was hanging on San's arm, her long, wide skirt floating gracefully over the uneven ground. She was looking up into San's face and laughing softly.

Midge looked down at her plate quickly. The adoring look in San's eyes was more than she could bear. She saw her own short, fringed skirt, the worn riding boots. No wonder San never saw her as a woman!

Geraldine chose the seat next to her and spread her skirts regally as she sat down. "You don't know how I envy you, my dear," she said in her high-pitched, affected voice.

Midge was genuinely astonished. "Who, me?"

"Of course I envy you." Geraldine patted her shoulder patronizingly. "You're the Star of the Show."

"Oh," Midge said in a small voice. Geraldine had been with Jed's show for more than two months, and had never bothered with her before. Her love for San must be pretty obvious. Cookie had just teased her about it, and now she knew Geraldine was going to make a fool out of her in front of the whole company.

"You have such a marvelous act," Geraldine chatted on. "How on earth do you manage to hit that coin every time with your pistol?"

For a moment Midge hesitated. She had expected some sore of attack where she was most vulnerable—her love for San. "Would you really like to know?" Midge's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Indeed I would. I know men who are awfully handy with firearms. But I never in my life heard of a lady sharpshooter. Somehow it doesn't seem quite proper." She laid her hand softly on San's arm. "Do you think it's ladylike?"

San sipped his coffee before answering. "Miss Midge," he said at last in the slow, soft voice so characteristic of him, "is mighty clever with a pistol."

He was evading the question. Maybe it wasn't her act he didn't like.

Geraldine's gay, artificial laughter rang out. "But you're not answering!" she cried. "Come now, be honest. Would you like to have your wife up shooting with all those strange men?"

No one seemed to move around the campfire. A traveling show is a hot-bed of gossip. Everyone always knows everything about everyone else. Midge sat miserable, waiting for his answer, realizing for the first time that her hopeless love for San was a secret to nobody—except may be to San himself.

He kicked a live coal back into the fire. "I never thought about it much."

But Geraldine wouldn't be put off. She insisted. "Be honest!"

"I wouldn't like it much," he said steadily.

Midge thought she had her emotions un-

der control, but she felt hot tears sting her eyes.

Geraldine wasn't through. "You were going to tell me how you manage to hit the coin every time."

"I don't do it at all," she retorted bitterly. Midge wasn't going to be kicked around without fighting back. "It's done with mirrors!"

Jed laughed. His booming laughter ringing out across the camp snapped the tension. Midge could hear the smothered giggles of the chorus girls.

San's face in the firelight was dark with displeasure. "What's so funny?" he demanded sharply. "Miss Bixton asked a civil question. I don't see why she isn't entitled to a civil answer."

Midge drew herself up very straight, her lips set in a firm little line. It was all very well for Geraldine to take any number of nasty cracks at her, but she wasn't permitted to say anything back.

"I didn't mean to be rude," she replied with quiet dignity. Love or no love, Midge wasn't going to split the show into two warring camps. She had too much pride for that.

"As a matter of fact," she turned to Geraldine. "My father taught me to shoot. He was an officer in the Confederate Army. Like so many such men, the war ruined him. He came West to seek his fortune—but never found it. When he died he had nothing to leave me but a pair of old dueling pistols. He was a real expert."

Mdige told her story so simply, so modestly, that the ugly mood that held them seemed to vanish. They were all just show people. Men and women who traveled from one bleak frontier town to the next, earning a living as best they could.

The dark displeasure faded from San's face. He was looking at her thoughtfully across the fire.

Jed rose. "We better get started," he suggested. "We can make a few miles tonight before it gets too dark to travel."

THE drive across the moonlit plain was beautiful. Midge sat alone in her wagon wondering what she should do. One of the main attractions of being a star in Jed Carson's Show was that she had her own wagon. It was only an old covered wagon with a bed and a couple of trunks bolted to the floor, but it had been home for two years now.

She wondered if she should marry Jed. That would be a way out. Jed was good and kind, and maybe she would grow to love him. Or she could leave the show. After all, she wanted to settle down. She had enough money to buy a little ranch, and she knew enough about cattle to run it.

She was turning these thoughts over in her mind when Jed gave the signal to pitch camp. She was hobbling her horses when she saw him come.

"Midge!" he called softly.

She went to him swiftly, fearlessly. "Yes, Jed?"

It was unusual for Jed to hesitate. But he stood now twisting his hat in his large, capable hands. "Was it true?" he asked seriously.

"Was what true?" she answered uneasily.

"What Cookie said." The words came from him in a rush. "Are you in love with that infatuated comic that follows after Geraldine like a calf after its mother?"

There was something in the contemptuous way he spoke of San that made Midge draw back. Instead of answering, she asked, "What if I am?"

"It means a lot to me. I've loved you a long time, Midge. I've always understood there was no one else. I've been patient—but I'll not be made a laughing stock before the whole company!"

Over Jed's shoulder Midge saw a shadow move under the cottonwood trees. There was something familiar about the breadth of the shoulders, the slow, easy walk. Jed stood impatiently waiting, and then she knew the identity of that slowly moving shadow. It was San! What was he doing lurking in the shadows?

Jed impulsively took her into his arms.

"I never made you any promise," she said slowly.

"Promise!" he exclaimed. "What of that? The love I have for you is a burning, urgent thing! You think because I laugh a lot, I have no heart. But let me tell you—"

The bitterness in Jed's strained voice caused Midge to step back involuntarily. "Please, Jed," she begged.

"Please, Jed!" he mocked. "Do you

think a man's heart is a plaything! I offered you my love, my life, my show—everything I have! What under heaven do you want?"

What did she want indeed? She answered slowly. "I want a little ranch someplace, a home of my own—not to be constantly moving about the country. I want a man to love and cherish me." As she spoke the words, Midge did not deny to herself that the man she wanted was San.

"You want a man to love you," Jed repeated. "Well, all right. I'll give up the show. We can settle down. You want a man to love you—and that man will be me!"

His arms closed tightly around her and his lips pressed hers with all the strength of his longing. Midge struggled to free herself, but it was useless. His arms held her close; his lips burned hers.

This was not the dream of love that Midge had cherished in her heart. She twisted free and stood before him, her eyes blazing. Jed reached for her, but Midge turned and fled.

In a moment she was lost in the shadows of the cottonwood trees. She heard Jed's footsteps pounding on the hard ground as he ran after her, and felt a hand laid softly on her arm. She started violently, and beside her San laughed softly.

"The game catching up with you?" he whispered.

She was close to tears. "What are you talking about?" she asked fearfully.

Again he laughed softly. "I think you got your just desserts, Midge. A woman can't flirt forever—without paying for it sometime."

She could hear Jed calling her name from the other side of the cottonwood clump. San's voice continued low beside her.

"You had him wrapped around your little finger. But you weren't content with that. No, you wanted to make me fall, too. You—"

She tried to pull away from him, but his hand on her arm held her firmly. Bitterly, laughing at her, San took her in his arms and drew her close.

"You've got the kind of beauty that makes men lose their heads," he said. "You don't play an honest game like Geraldine. You don't look a man in the eye and challenge him. No, your way is the soft, adoring look. Well, little sharpshooter, the game is up!"

E BENT and kissed her. The kiss that had begun in mockery melted as their lips met. The bitterness of the night changed as if touched with magic. Above them, the stars seemed to stand motionless in the cloudless sky. The touch of their lips had let lose the power of love.

San released her slowly. Through the night they heard Jed calling her.

"You didn't really believe," Midge said softly, "the awful things you said."

He still held her in his arms, and she felt his strong arms tremble. "Not with my heart," he said slowly. "But I always wanted to be free. You make me want to be caught." He hesitated. "Did you mean what you said to Jed—that you had never given him any reason?"

"Of course," she answered simply.

"And did you mean it, about the ranch?" he persisted.

"I never meant anything more!" she replied fervently.

"Then leave the show!" he cried. "Give up this life and come with me."

Her heart was beating wildly. Out of this dreadful night was coming the solution to her troubles. San had mistaken the love in her eyes, and to protect himself had flirted with Geraldine. Her heart sang.

San held her at arms length. "Wait a minute," he said slowly. "I can't run out on Jed until he gets someone to take my place. But if you're going to be Mrs. McBride—no more pistol shooting."

Gladly, she agreed. It was little enough to give up for a lifetime of happiness.

The next few days slipped by in a happy dream. Jed, surprisingly enough after that one wild outburst the night he kissed her, accepted his defeat with gallantry. He seemed willing to lose her—if it meant Midge's happiness.

But Geraldine was no graceful loser. She sulked, and threatened that in the end she would regain San. Midge, living in the first happiness of her love, paid little attention. The show was traveling through country they had visited last year, and despite the fact that she was no longer doing her act, she found satisfaction in the fact that she was remembered in all the little frontier towns.

Men drove many miles for a chance to shoot it out with her again, and Jed had to

use all his ingenuity to explain why "the little lady" was no longer challenging all comers.

It wasn't until they hit the town of Gallop, however, that Jed had real trouble. The year before, a rough prospector from the hills had given her some pretty stiff competition. He was a big redhead named Bailey, and he was determined to have a return match.

San had ridden out to a neighboring ranch to pick up some horses, and Midge was alone when Cookie came to her.

He limped angrily to the wagon where she was resting. "What are you going to do, Midge, let Jed lose his show?"

Midge gaped at him in astonishment. "What are you talking about?" she demanded.

Cookie shoved back his battered old hat and stared at her. "Mean to tell me, you ain't heard? Geraldine started a rumor that your act wasn't on the level. Made a lot of people mad. They arranged a real marksmanship match here in Gallop. Now that Jed says you won't shoot, they're threatening to wreck the show and run us out of town."

Midge jumped down. "They can't do that! I'll see Jed right away."

Jed's face was unusually sober. This was something he couldn't turn into a joke.

"Is it really serious?" she asked.

Jed nodded. "There's some talk of running us out of town. We always won a lot of money with that act of yours."

"I wish San were here—"

"So do I," Jed interrupted. "If he were, I'd tell him and we'd arrange a shooting match and prove to those fellows we're on the level. But San's quick tempered. I wouldn't want him to think we were doing something behind his back."

"I'm sure San'll understand," Midge said with certainty.

They walked slowly back to the wagon, opened the little round-topped trunk that was bolted to the floor of her wagon, and took out the worn dueling pistols.

The cold steel had a familiar feel. Midge said: "Tell Bailey I'll shoot it out with him any time he's ready."

Jed patted her arm. "You're a real pal, Midge." The worried frown hadn't left his face. "As soon as it's over I'll ride out and meet San and explain it to him. I'll make things right for you. Midge, I promise."

The match was set for four o'clock. Midge was surprised to see how it had excited the sleepy little town. As she walked out of the camp, the pistols strapped to her waist, she passed Geraldine.

Geraldine flounced her skirts and whispered shrilly, "Fine mess you got us into!"

Remembering what Cookie had said, that half the trouble was due to Geraldine's malicious gossip, she held her tongue with difficulty.

She heard Geraldine's low, vicious voice following her. "You're riding high. But I'll get him yet!"

Then the crowd closed about her. She could hear their angry threats and was glad Jed was walking beside her.

While the judges examined her pistols and Bailey squinted down the barrels, she stood talking quietly to Jed. She was beginning to be worried about San. What if he should misunderstand after all? "You'll go to meet San as soon as we're through, won't you?" she begged.

"Don't worry, Midge." he reassured her. "I'll fix it."

THE judges were pacing off the distance, 60 feet from the targets. This wasn't going to be any exhibition of trick shots. No shooting at a coin from ten paces or other fancy shots.

There were to be ten shots fired slowly and at will during a five-minute interval. The second round of ten shots was to be timed, twenty seconds for five shots, and the last round was to be rapid fire, all ten shots fired within ten seconds.

There was to be no element of chance in the contest. The winner would be the one to win three consecutive matches out of five. It was a deadly serious business. Midge looked unhappily at the angry faces around her.

She was worried. Worried about whether San would understand or not. *"No one can shoot with a steady hand and a clear eye who has his mind on other things."* It was as if her father stood at her shoulder, warning her.

Bailey fired rapidly and well, his ice-blue eyes expressionless as he came from the target. As soon as the match began, the training of many years took possession of Midge,

slowly forcing all thought of San from her mind.

It was a brutally close match. Bailey was an excellent shot. So close to the heart of the target did the two contestants hit, that the judges measured carefully in the smallest fractions of an inch to decide each round.

Back and forth the decision see-sawed. First Bailey took a round and then Midge won. It seemed easy to win two consecutive matches, but neither one could manage that extra effort that would give them the third round and victory.

The original five matches were followed by five more, and then another five. It seemed to Midge that she would go on standing at the firing line listening to the commands, "Fire! Reload! Fire!" for the rest of her life.

The sun painted long shadows across the level plain. Time had passed, steadily, relentlessly, as she and Bailey exchanged shot for shot. Never was she able to gain the necessary three matches.

But no matter who won, the fact that Midge was a supurb markswoman had been proved. Long ago the angry murmurs had vanished; in their place cheers greeted each successful round. The monotony and strain were telling on Bailey as well as on Midge. She saw sweat darken his hatband, and she was aware of the grim, tight line of his mouth. Suddenly she laughed, a gay, challenging laugh.

It was an old trick, but it unnerved him and he shot wide of the target. Good, she thought, this would be her round. She already had two rounds. Victory was almost within her reach. But the old dueling pistol that had always seemed to light in her hand was heavy as stone.

Then, while she waited for Bailey to finish firing, she turned her attention once more to the crowd. The old familiar crowd that had always steadied her nerves. Now, the figures seemed to part dizzily, as in a crazy dance, and she saw Geraldine hanging on San's arm, her long, wide skirt floating gracefully over the uneven ground. She was looking up into San's face and laughing softly. But it was the look in San's eyes that cut Midge to the heart.

It was an old nightmare. A vision she had seen in the firelight many times in the past come back to haunt her. She closed her eyes wearily, waiting for the moment of comfort the darkness would bring, and expecting to open them on the familiar crowd.

When she opened her eyes the figures of the nightmare were still there. Only this time Jed was there, too. He was talking and gesturing emphatically to San. Wearily she passed her hand across her forehead. It was real. It wasn't a nightmare. Somehow San had gotten back before the match was over.

As if in a dream she watched the three figures on the edge of the shooting field. It was as if the drama being played before her eyes had nothing to do with her. With startling clearness she understood the meaning of the tableau.

Jed was trying to explain to San why Midge was once more standing before an audience shooting it out with a strange man. That Jed wasn't succeeding was plain from the triumphant smile on Geraldine's face, the stubborn shake of San's head.

It seemed to Midge as though San was purposely misunderstanding. She felt her heart turning icy cold in her breast. There would be no explaining to San, ever.

The judges called to her, and she heard their voices vaguely, almost from another world. How many rounds had she fired that afternoon? Midge had no idea what the score was any longer. Automatically she stepped to the firing line. What did it matter? She knew that her brief dream of love was over. Geraldine had won the most important stakes after all.

Midge missed the first shot. For the first time she had shot wide of the bull's-eye. She missed the second shot, and she saw a triumphant smile dawn on Bailey's bronzed face as he realized she was unnerved.

Then she felt a hand on her shoulder. A hand, calm and confident. She turned to look into Jed's sympathetic eyes.

"You can call the whole thing off," he said softly.

It was as if Jed's strength flowed into her with the simple pressure of his hand. The iron in her soul hardened. Love might be lost; that she couldn't help, but she wouldn't let Jed down—wouldn't let herself down.

With grim determination she fired, fired unseeing at the target, at the circles within circles. She saw slow-talking, quick tempered Sanford McBride, saw him as she had never seen him before, with eyes unblinded; and she saw the heart of Jed Carson.

As she stepped back from the firing line

to permit Bailey his chance, she stood alone, tall and slender, her shoulders held firmly back. She had been a dreadful little fool.

Then the judges stepped back from the target and she heard a cheer. Jed was wringing her hand. "Bless you, Midge. You couldn't have been finer!"

DIMLY, she knew it was over. She had lost count of the score in those dreadful moments when she first saw San and Geraldine on the field. Though it meant nothing whatever to her, she had won. Despite the two shots that had gone wild at the beginning of this round, her laugh—it seemed ages ago since she had pulled that trick—had made Bailey shoot so poorly that she had won the third consecutive round.

Geraldine pushed her way forward. "Let me congratulate you." Her high-pitched, affected voice grated on Midge's worn nerves. "And," she winked significantly, "you can congratulate me, too. San and I are being married tonight."

Looking into San's eyes Midge saw they were bitter, angry, smoldering just under the surface.

"You couldn't wait until my back was turned, could you?" he snapped. He took Geraldine's hand in his. "Congratulate her," he demanded.

It was as if San was deliberately destroying all the love she had ever had for him. Pulling everything down around her head.

She heard Jed's quiet, firm voice. "You're being unreasonable. Midge saved us all from a very awkward situation."

"Yeah?" San sneered.

"I've been very patient with you," Jed cut in, "on Midge's account. But now you're going to get the beating of your life!"

Very slowly Jed took off his coat. His eyes were hard, and his mouth was set grimly.

Midge came forward quickly and laid her hand softly on his arm. She felt the hard tenseness of his muscles, and as strength had flowed into her from the touch of his hand on her shoulder, now excitement coursed through her veins.

"Don't bother," she said a little breathlessly.

Jed shook his head. "Nobody's going to hurt you ever again as long as I'm around."

How could she have been so blind! She had wanted a man to love and cherish her. All the time Jed had been doing just that, and yet her wilful heart had gone chasing after a man who could never have answered its need.

She wondered if it was too late to find Jed, if she had spoiled everything with her foolish infatuation for San. "It really doesn't matter, Jed."

But he wasn't listening; he was peeling off his coat. She looked quickly at San. Geraldine was trying to pull him away into the crowd, and San was anxious to go.

"Listen, Jed," Midge said firmly. Firmly enough for him to pause and look down at her. "I wouldn't have missed this afternoon for the world." Excitement made her voice catch, her cheeks flame. If she had to propose to this stubborn showman, she'd do it!

"This shooting contest saved me from making a terrible mistake," she continued.

Jed was listening now, his head a little to one side, his eyes fastened on her elfin face.

"Dad used to say a shooting match was better than poker for revealing a man's character. I'm glad Geraldine wants to marry San—it saves me a heap of explaining." She went to him quickly.

For a moment Jed's eyes were bewildered, doubting that at last good fortune had come to him, but her shining eyes, her softly parted lips convinced him and he took her in his arms.

His lips pressed hers with all the strength of his love for her, and as his arms tightened around her, Midge knew her heart had at last made the right choice. She felt the power of his lean body, and knew that this was the man who would love and cherish her to the end of her days. She sighed happily.

"Where would you like that ranch?" he whispered gently.

"Ranch?"

Then she remembered. Somewhere back in the uncertain past she had wanted a ranch. "I guess I didn't really know what I wanted," she murmured softly. "I don't seem to want it anymore. I have everything I'll ever want."

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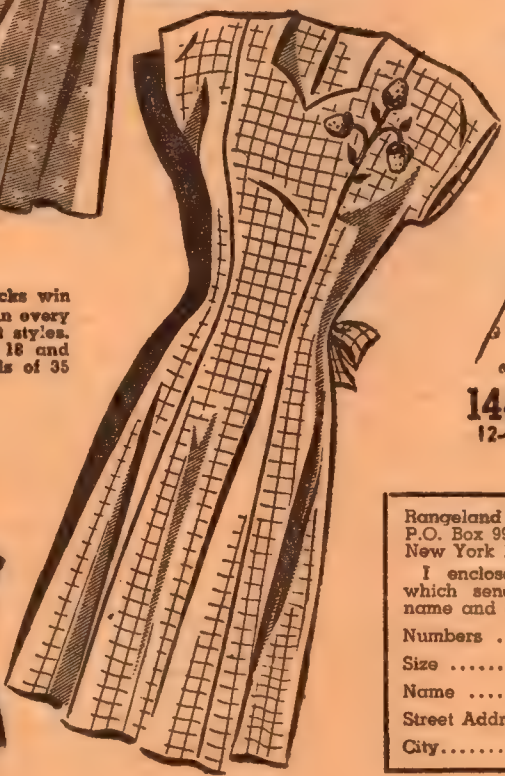

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Julie accused: "You crook!"

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By Kenneth Fowler

JULIE from ST. LOUIS

Rollicking Old-West Love Novel

A career girl was Julie, with an adding machine for a heart. She knew figures and what to do with them—but she lost count when exasperating Cowboy Vic stole a kiss.

CHAPTER ONE

Cupid's Brand

JULIE TATE was the kind of girl who knew what she wanted and how to get it—she thought. Because she was the impersonal, self-assured type, who had to be told only once how to do a thing and then did it better than her instructor, people who thought they knew her would say: "Julie Tate? You watch—that girl will be a successful business woman some day. But she'll never be the kind to cuddle up to a man. Got an adding machine for a heart."

They forgot that adding machines know what to do with figures; and certainly Julie knew what to do with hers. Not that there was much she needed to do—except display it to advantage. Also, adding machines never make mistakes—and neither did Julie, till fate crossed her trail with Vic Martin's. Then Julie had to find out, once and for all, if she was allergic to love. Allergic was not the word for it. . . .

Vic was at the station with the buckboard and a span of grays when her train pulled in at the drab little signal-stop depot of Adobe Springs. No one else got off at Adobe Springs—a fact which did not surprise Julie when she saw its gray huddle of weathered false-fronts, including the Grand United & Bon Ton Mercantile and five saloons, one painted.

Julie was accustomed to bigness and activity; she was also accustomed to men—men who were in the habit of looking at her as though she were somebody one could look at twice without undue hardship on the optical organs. But when tall, gangling Vic Martin came awkwardly up to the station platform to take her bags, he held out a

big, calloused palm and grinned like a bashful schoolboy greeting the new teacher.

"Miss Tate?"

She nodded indifferently. "I'm Julie Tate. I suppose you must be Vic Martin."

"That's right, Ma'am. Buckboard's right down here, below the station. Here, let me tote them bags for you."

"They're new. Please be careful with them," Julie said, and was conscious of Vic Martin's blue, sun-squinted eyes turning upon her with a look of faint surprise. Then he had picked up the bags and was leading the way down to the buckboard.

Julie said nothing as he handed her up to the worn corduroy seat and tucked a buffalo robe around her legs and ankles; then he stepped up to the driver's position and gathered up the reins.

"It's ten-eleven mile to T-Dot," he said hesitantly. "If you'd like to stop at the ho-tel and freshen up a mite—"

"No, thank you. I attended to all those details on the train."

A slow flush seeped through the dark weathering of Vic Martin's face. "Well—we'll mosey right along, then. We—we was sorry you couldn't get out for the fun'ral."

"I'm afraid I'm not especially fond of funerals, Mr. Martin."

The foreman of T-Dot stared at her blankly. "J.G. always spoke like he was mighty proud of you, Miss Tate. You was the only blood kin he had."

Julie shrugged. "Uncle John and I had very little in common, I'm afraid. Has there been any appraisal of the place yet?"

The foreman stiffened. "Appraisal, Ma'am. You mean—?"

"I mean," said Julie bluntly, "do you have any idea what T-Dot is worth—how much it will bring on the open market?"

A look of shocked astonishment froze Vic Martin's blue eyes. "But T-Dot's not for sale, Miss Tate! J.G. never intended—"

"I'm not interested in what J.G. intended, Mr. Martin. I own T-Dot now. And I intend to sell it at the first favorable opportunity."

Vic Martin was staring at her now as if she had suddenly gone out of her head. "But you couldn't sell T-Dot, Miss Tate! Why, J.G. was always sayin' how, after he was gone—"

"Please let's not be morbid, Mr. Martin. And if you could whip up this team a little faster, I would like to get unpacked before supper time."

Vic Martin relapsed into a grim and unfriendly silence, and Julie let her thoughts run back to the day the telegram had arrived. It had been a shock to her, even though she hadn't seen her Uncle John Tate in five years. Her father and mother were dead, and he was her only immediate relative; nevertheless, the news that she had inherited T-Dot had come as a stunning surprise.

The other girls in the offices of T. Martinsen & Son, Stocks and Bonds, where she had been secretary to the senior member of the firm, had joshed her upon learning that she had inherited a horse ranch, but young Tony Martinsen had chosen to treat the matter more seriously. In fact, Tony seemed to be really upset.

"Good Lord, Julie, you're not really going to run that ranch!" he'd exclaimed, when she had shown him the telegram that brought the news.

"Why not?" she'd teased him. "Your father always said I had a fine head for business."

"Damn it, Julie, you know I'm interested in you."

"I know, Tony. And also in every new chorus girl that comes to town, and a dozen other assorted females." She gave him a teasing smile. "You'll manage all right till I get back. That is—if I *come* back."

T. Martinsen had given her a month's leave of absence, and she'd taken the first sleeper out of St. Louis bound west. And now here she was—with this ranch hayseed already making sheep's eyes at her and worrying about how long his job was going to last. Well, she'd found out at T. Martinsen's that you had to have a hard head to get along in business.

And business was fun, if you played it that way. It might even be fun managing a ranch—if only Adobe Springs wasn't such a drab, dinky little dot on the map of Nowhere. But to *live* in such a God-forsaken spot. . . . Julie shivered.

Vic Martin's voice broke through her thoughts. "Well, there she is—old T-Dot. You can see the buildings from this rise. Ranch house lies back of that clump of live-oaks—you'll be able to spot it in another minute."

JULIE stared. All she could see was a white-painted corral, a rusty-looking windmill with idly flapping sails, and a big, unpainted barn that looked as though one half of the roof was about to collapse from sheer top-heaviness. The house, which came into view as they rounded the next bend, didn't add much to the picture: it was just a frame story-and-a-half structure, once white, but now a sun-faded gray, with two tall white chimneys from which the paint had peeled, leaving them naked and scabby-looking.

"House needs a little fixin' up," Vic Martin said, evidently reading her thoughts. "We've been kind of busy with the horses, lately."

"Do you spend *all* your time with horses, Mr. Martin?"

Vic Martin turned in the seat and gave her a disconcertingly steady glance. "Not at all," he answered shortly, and his voice had a harsh, flat sound, suddenly. "But I know what you mean."

His eyes held on her in frank appraisal, and to her faint surprise, she found herself embarrassingly at a loss for words. Something about this tall, homespun-looking man at her elbow filled her all at once with a strange uneasiness, with vague, tantalizing cravings she couldn't shake off. She said: "Forget I said it. It didn't mean anything."

"Oh, yes, it did," Vic Martin insisted stubbornly. "You meant I'm no woman-chaser. Well, I'm not. And I reckon the horses will keep me occupied till the right one comes along."

"The right horse?" Julie couldn't help asking, wickedly.

"That," Vic said, "is very funny."

"Oh, but I was perfectly serious!"

The foreman shook his head in a dogged, irritated way. "No," he said. "You meant it to git my dander up."

"Why, I never—"

"Look," Vic said, and pulled the grays to a halt at the side of the road. "Maybe you and I had better have an understanding, right now."

Julia paled. "Will you please drive on? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, all right." Vic's voice was flat again. "You'd expect this, sooner or later, so you might as well have it now and git it over with. Then if it's the kind you like—" The rest was lost to Julie as he took her suddenly in his strong arms and pressed his mouth to hers.

Julie felt her heart do an abrupt somersalt as he held her so tight she couldn't move, couldn't breathe hardly; and the kiss did not end till he wanted it to.

"There," Vic Martin said finally, releasing her and deliberately unwinding the reins from the whipstock. "Now you know my brand. If you like 'em, just ask any time and I'll be glad to fill your orders—from my waiting list."

"You—you cheap country boor!" Julie found her voice at last. "You—you—"

Suddenly she swung back her right arm and slapped him stingingly across the cheek.

"And there's *my* brand!" she exploded with pent fury. "And the next time you try anything like that, I'll put it on you with claws!"

Vic Martin gingerly caressed the still tingling welt where her palm had crimsoned his darkly tanned cheek.

"Claws, eh?" he murmured. "Well, at least we'd be starting from scratch!"

"Pardon me," Julie said icily, "while I burst into wild laughter." She glared at him. "You can pack your duffle as soon as we get to T-Dot. Or did I forget to tell you you're fired?"

He looked at her, small, black-headed, and plump in the places where a girl should be, and his wide, pleasantly curved mouth crinkled quizzically.

"My, my," he said. "Sassy, too. I'd sure hate to take you over my knee and spank you. Or would I?" he added with a grin. "No, don't guess I would, come to think of it!"

"You—you just try it!"

"That a dare?"

"Oh!" She abruptly turned her head and fastened her stony gaze upon the road ahead.

Vic flicked his whip at the flagging grays and the horses picked up their heels with a suddenness that drove the buckboard forward with a startling jerk. Julie's pert little red sailor was yanked from its moorings in her black curls and tumbled forward across her eyes. She pulled it back with an infuriated yank.

"Can't you even *drive*?" she cried.

But Vic Martin seemed to have an answer for everything. "Cute hat," he murmured. "Bet you'd look right smart in a Stetson. White one, with a tall crown. I'll see if we can't dig up somethin'."

She answered him with a cold and bitter silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Barnstorming Spitfire

SHE felt a bit self-conscious, the next morning, when she came down to breakfast in the big oak-beamed living room wearing black whipcord riding breeches, a yellow turtleneck sweater that hid the slim column of her throat but spectacularly failed to hide anything else, and new saddle-tan Justin boots, stitched at the flaps with yellow silk stars. She had bought the outfit before leaving St. Louis and was darned if she was going to leave it in her suitcase now, no matter what anybody thought.

Gray-headed Aunt Tillie Westcott, a plump, spry little lady who had been her Uncle John's housekeeper for as long as Julie had any remembrance of the place, flicked sparrow-bright eyes at her as she stepped into the living room. The eyes widened in frank astonishment at sight of the sweater and jodhpurs.

"Lord, Honey, ain't you stretchin' that sweater a mite?" she asked.

Julie answered coolly: "My face isn't my best feature, Auntie."

Aunt Tillie flushed. "Why, I think you're right cute, dear. But that sweater!" She made disapproving clucking noises as she went about setting the table. "It might give a man notions."

"Maybe," Julie said softly, "that's the idea." Then, quickly changing the subject: "Umm! Ham and eggs! Bring 'em on, Aunt Tillie—I'm starved."

Later, in the sunny little bedroom off the living room which Aunt Tillie had prettied up for her with fussy lace curtains and a home-made patchwork quilt, she bent before her dressing mirror and carefully put on her face.

"Needs it, too," she thought, staring critically into the glass. She picked up her lip rouge and altered the somewhat severe line of her mouth, drawing her lips into softer and fuller outline. There was nothing she could do about the rather blunt, firm chin, or the small and slightly uptilted nose, with its faint dusting of freckles above the bridge.

Finished with her lips, she thinned the line of her eyebrows with a dark pencil, slicked back her crow-black hair with a few vigorous strokes of the brush, and studied the completed product with a faint frown.

"I don't want to look *too* much like a hussy," she murmured, studying her gray-eyed reflection in the mirror. "But Mr. Smart-Alec Martin has got to be taught a lesson. And if he falls from this version of little Julie from St. Louis it's going to be just too bad—for him."

A plan had slowly taken shape in Julie's mind. She had begun to put it in effect last night, by pretending to Vic that she was letting bygones be bygones, and by telling him she was sorry for the fit of temper she had displayed yesterday afternoon on the ride in from Adobe Springs.

"And now *you* apologize," she'd wound up pertly, "for kissing me when my back was turned."

He had taken the bait like a hungry fish. "But your back wasn't turned!" he'd grinned at her. "And besides, no man should ever have to apologize for kissing a pretty girl. Now if I *hadn't* kissed you, maybe there'd be something to apologize about."

She'd flashed him a swift smile. "Well, that's an awfully pretty speech, anyway. But after this, I think you'd at least ought to give warning."

"I couldn't make any rash promises," Vic Martin had rejoined, grinning, and then had left for the barn to look after some chores.

It was from Aunt Tillie that Julie had learned about Dade Hampton, owner of the neighboring Ladder ranch, two miles north of T-Dot on Granite Creek. Julie's ears had pricked up when Aunt Tillie had mentioned that Hampton had made several unsuccessful attempts to buy T-Dot.

Then, when John Tate had stubbornly continued to refuse every offer, the owner of Ladder had tried put T-Dot out of business by selling horses at an actual loss to the Army remount station at Custer Springs. But John Tate had declared he

would starve rather than sell the T-Dot.

Julie had made a mental note to ride over and see Hampton at the first opportunity; right now, however, Hampton would have to wait until she had given Vic Martin his come-uppance.

She found the foreman in the big horse barn, currycombing a sleek-coated chestnut mare.

"That's a smart-looking horse," Julie said.

The foreman, unaware of her approach, swiveled abruptly at the sound of her voice.

"Oh, hello," he said, then stared at her with an expression that started tiny trip-hammers of excitement pounding in Julie. "Excuse me if I take a double look," he murmured finally, "but that's you under all that war-paint, isn't it?"

Julie's made-over mouth formed a scarlet pout. "That's not a very good beginning, Mr. Martin. I thought we were going to be friends."

"My friends," Vic Martin said, straightening slowly, "all call me Vic."

"Hello, Vic," Julie said.

"Hello—Julie."

Julie took a silver cigarette case from the pocket of her jodhpurs—a gift Tony Martinsen had presented to her just before her train had left. She scratched a match across her breeches and leaned back languidly against a box stall as she applied the flame to her cigarette.

"Like one?" she offered. "They're a special Turkish blend I get from Chicago."

Vic Martin frowned. "Thanks, I roll my own."

Julie dropped back her head and let the first lungful of smoke dribble provocatively through her artfully reddened mouth.

"Oh, try a store cigarette for a change," she urged, holding out the silver case. "Or here—you take this, and I'll light a fresh one."

She held out the cigarette from which she had just taken the first puff, its butt red-stained from her lip rouge.

Vic Martin hesitated. Then he put back the makings he had just taken from his Levi pocket and took it from her. "All right." His tone was suddenly curt. "You asked me to give you warning next time, Julie—remember? Well, this is it."

Julie's heart gave a pound. "Please, Vic, I didn't mean—"

"Oh, yes, you did." Vic Martin took a deep drag on the rouge-tipped cigarette. His blue eyes had a slate-like hardness as he exhaled the smoke with a weighted deliberateness; then he dropped the cigarette and ground it out under his boot heel. "Tastes real good," he said, "but I know something tastes better," and he threw down the currycomb he had been holding and pulled her roughly against him.

"Vic—stop! I tell you I didn't mean—"

"You little devil! You know damned well what you meant!" Vic Martin's voice was suddenly harsh, flat. And then he had his lean-muscled arm clamped restrainingly around her, and his mouth was pressed firmly, insistently, to hers.

She struggled briefly to tear herself away from him; then with a draining sigh she went limp in his arms, and gave her lips to him with a swooning abandonment.

She had no awareness of how long it was before she wrenched her head away, brushing her lips against his wind-chapped cheek and leaving a bright smear of red on it. And then, as his grip on her relaxed momentarily, she pushed breathlessly out of his arms.

"All right," she panted, staring at him with a sudden hard bitterness. "You got what you wanted—now please saddle me a horse."

"What!" Vic Martin eyed her coldly. "No slap this time?"

"Will—will you please saddle me a horse, or do I have to do it myself?"

"Let's see," murmured Vic Martin, stroking his rouge-smeared cheek with an exaggerated thoughtfulness. "Only eligible man I know in these parts is Dade Hampton, and he's about the lowest-down orneriest apology for a—"

"It just happens that Dade Hampton is the man I'm going to see."

Vic Martin's voice abruptly flattened. "Dont' be a little fool, Julie! Dade Hampton couldn't pay you half what this spread is worth."

Julie took out her silver case and lighted another cigarette with a hand that trembled slightly.

"Are you going to saddle me that horse, Vic?"

"No, I'm not! Julie, I'm telling you this for your own good. Hampton's a—"

"I think I've had enough of your warn-

ing for one day," Julie cut in coldly, and started for the door. "And you'd better wipe off your face," she called back vindictively across her shoulder, "before Aunt Tillie sees it. She might get the idea you'd been sparking a mare that used lipstick!"

CHAPTER THREE

Where Three's a Crowd

HE stocky, dark-haired man who rode beside Julie Tate sat his saddle like one long accustomed to forking leather, but Julie, whose sole experience with horses had derived from a few bridle path jaunts with Tony Martinsen in St. Louis, had already begun to feel saddle-sore. She was conscious of a dull, nagging pain at the small of her back; she also was conscious of Dade Hampton's dark, aggressive eyes.

She had been carrying a mackinaw across the pommel of her saddle, and now she picked it up and slid into it, chiefly to give Hampton's eyes a rest, but also because it had begun to turn bitterly cold.

"We'd ought to be catching up with him soon," Hampton remarked as they crossed a dry wash that led upward into rocky maze of hills and gullies. "He can't be very far ahead of us now."

"Aunt Tillie said he had about an hour's start," Julie offered. "Maybe we'd better turn back. It's getting late, and besides, you own the horses now. So what difference does it make if he gets to Custer Junction before we do?"

Dade Hampton scowled. "The horses are mine, all right, but if he gets to the post ahead of us, what's to stop him from grabbing the money for them and skipping? Besides, you know I've got to get those remounts to the Army before noon tomorrow or I lose my contract to supply them for the rest of the year. I can't afford to lose that contract, Miss Tate."

Dade Hampton gigged his big chestnut, and Julie roweled her sorrel to keep up with him. The trail was getting rougher, the country wilder and more desolate, with mountains now beginning to hem them in on either side.

Julie's thoughts ran back, fringed now with a definite worry, to her initial meeting with the owner of the Ladder, a few hours earlier. Dade Hampton's dark, impassive eyes had shown startled surprise, then an unmistakable eagerness, when she had announced her desire to dispose of T-Dot.

"You're sure there's not some joker in this, Miss Tate?" the Ladder's owner had asked, a little suspiciously. "I made J.G. several offers, you know, and he—"

"Maybe you didn't offer enough," Julie interrupted boldly. "My price is eight thousand dollars."

"Eight thousand! But that's two thousand more than I—"

"I happen to know T-Dot is worth ten, Mr. Hampton. And so do you."

"You've got a head on your shoulders, Miss Tate." He ogled her, grinning. "A mighty pretty head, too. Tell you what I'll do. I'm in a jam—got to deliver twenty remounts to the Army at Custer Junction by noon tomorrow. And frankly, I haven't got that many horses available. Let me ride over with you now for a look at yours. If they're satisfactory, I'll sign on the dotted line with you today."

"That suits me," Julie said. "Let's get started."

But then she had begun to have misgivings. After all, when she had inherited the T-Dot had she not also inherited the responsibility of carrying it on, in accordance with her Uncle's wishes? And in just the two days she had been out here now, she had felt better physically, more wonderfully and vigorously alive, than she had ever felt in her life.

And there was something else. She had tried to fight against it, but she couldn't get Vic Martin out of her thoughts. She had tried, with every wile known to the female, to hobble Vic with the chains of a mad infatuation, the better to punish him. But the chains, ironically, seemed to have become caught around her own pretty legs, and the harder she struggled to break them, the more she seemed to become entangled.

At T-Dot, to her utter confusion, she found the barn and corrals empty, and Vic gone. Then Aunt Tillie had told them, Vic, apparently having divined her purpose to sell T-Dot to Dade Hampton, had teamed up every available horse on the ranch—eighteen or twenty, Aunt Tillie had estimated—and had lit a shuck, heading for Custer Junction. And T-Dot, without its

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QUICK! GET MENNEN QUICOOL

(Continued from page 27)

Before anyone could stop her, she lunged at Laurie, and with one stroke, tore the kimona off. "That's *my* costume, too!" she shrieked accusingly.

But this time Len headed her off before she could do any more damage. "Hold on a minute," he said. "You'll get what's comin' to you without all this ruckus. You say you're the new dancer from Chicago?"

"You bet your boots I am!" the enraged girl declared hotly.

Len turned to Laurie. "Then—who are you?" he asked blankly.

Suddenly Laurie came to life. All the fire and fury that had been seething within her, came to a boil. She drew herself up, now feeling proud and lovely in the plumed dance costume.

"I'm the school teacher," she said, storm clouds gathering in her face. "I'm the horse-faced buzzard that this town will never miss—because I'm not going to give it the chance to. You, Mack Trimble—I hope you have better luck with that overstuffed redhead who calls herself a dancer. And you, Len Martin," her voice broke, "you better have another heart-to-heart talk with those eyes of yours. I'm getting out of here—and fast!"

She was half sobbing as she ran to the door. Mack Trimble stood aside for her to pass, but she turned back for a last thrust.

"You," she addressed the redhead scathingly. "I may be only a simple schoolmarm, but I've made more history in this town than you'll ever make!"

THE NEXT half hour was a blur to Laurie. Swiftly she donned her own clothes in the dressing room, and crossed back to the hotel. Once in her own rooms, she threw herself down on the bed and let the tears come.

When her eyes, but not her heart, was all cried out, she wearily set about the job of repacking. Back into the faded carpetbag went the second-hand books, the dark skirts and the white shirtwaists she would never wear in the Aurora schoolroom. She was regarding them sadly when she heard a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

to write to me, and I promise to answer all the letters I receive.

MARGIE LAWTON
1809 19th Ave.
Seattle 22, Wash.

Ink Slinger

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES and I sure do enjoy the stories.

Now for my description:

I am a mountain boy of 15, with brown hair and blue eyes. I am 5 ft. 7 in. tall and weigh 137 lbs. I am also an apprentice printer and am very good at it. I work here in a printing shop and it is interesting work.

I like all kinds of sports, such as horseback riding, swimming, baseball, football and basketball. I can also play tennis but I'm no shark.

Come on boys and especially girls, sling some ink my way. As my job suggests, I sure can sling her! I promise to answer all letters as quickly as possible.

L. T. LEACH
Box 122
Hayard, Ky.

Curly-Haired Cecelia

Dear Editor:

This is my first attempt to crash the Pony Express and I hope I'm successful.

I'm 14, a freshman in high school, and a so-called bobby-soxer. I have brown curly hair, green eyes, am 5 ft. 2 in. tall, and weigh 105 lbs. My hobbies are collecting souvenirs, playing the piano and . . . you guessed it, eating! I like all sports, especially tennis and roller skating. I'm interested in aviation and my ambition is to be an aviatrix.

I would like to hear from others interested in aviation, but I promise to answer all letters.

CECELIA BROCH
Box 87
Harrah, Okla.

Aviatrix

Dear Editor:

I have always read RANGELAND ROMANCES and think it's tops.

I'm 17 years old, with light brown hair and greenish-blue eyes. I have many hobbies, two of which are collecting things made from sea shells and post cards of all kinds.

I'm a cadet in the Civil Air Patrol and would like to hear from other cadets. However, not being a cadet in the CAP is no reason for not writing, because I want to hear from anybody.

I have a lot to write to everyone and will answer my letters faithfully. Also I will exchange post cards, souvenirs, and snapshots with whoever writes. So come, come friends, and fill my mail box to the top.

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Adios, amigos, till next month.

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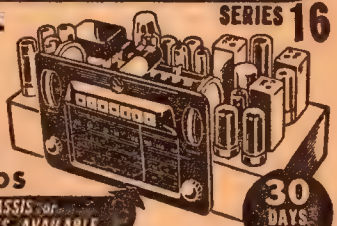

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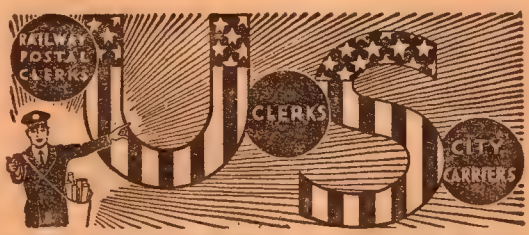

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(Continued from page 71)

Laughing Blue Eyes

Dear Editor:

Here's the Hawkeye State bowing in on Pony Express. Ever since I've known what the word pen pal meant, it's been my hobby—or I should say one of them. During the war I did a little traveling and have a few interesting tales to put forth.

My hobbies are collecting songs, mostly hillbilly and cowboy songs, since I play a few string instruments; postcards, both picture and comic; and other hobbies too numerous to mention.

I'll soon be 24 years old, have laughing blue eyes, light brown hair, and am about 5 ft. 2 in. tall. I'll not say how much I weigh but will say I'm called pleasingly plump, if there is anything pleasing about that. And, by the way, I'm single.

My mail box is open to all, be they 6 or 60. Come one, come all.

DOROTHY I. McCARTY
210 West Woodland
Ottumwa, Iowa.

A Letter-Writing Guy

Dear Editor:

Please give a lonely guy a break and put this in a small corner of your magazine, so I may hear from pen pals all over the world.

I am a doctor's assistant. I'm 6 ft. 1 in. tall, have brown hair and eyes, and a medium build. I enjoy all sports, good music and reading. I have also toured with the U.S.O.

So give a greasepaint-lonely, world-wide letter-writing guy a break, please! How about it, pals?

RALPH CARROTHERS
612 Second St. N.W.
Canton, Ohio

Jitterbug Champ

Dear Editor:

Please print my plea. I'm a long way from my home town and I get so lonesome.

I am a girl of 19 years, have blonde hair and dark eyes. I like all sports. Horseback riding and reading RANGELAND ROMANCES are my favorite hobbies, although I was a jitterbug champion of Colorado last year.

I would like to hear from girls and boys, 19 to 25. Also all servicemen and women who are lonesome.

KATHRYN HANSON
General Delivery
Las Vegas, Nevada

Margie Says Hello

Dear Editor:

I think Pony Express is such a wonderful way to meet pen pals that enjoy reading this magazine as much as I enjoy it, so I had to write and say "Thank You."

I'm a high school girl, 5 ft. 6 in. tall. I have auburn hair and blue eyes. Horseback riding is my favorite sport; skating and boating come next.

I'd really love to hear from anyone who wants

"I'm not going to sell T-Dot, Vic. I'm going to stay here and run it." She added, with a flash of spirit: "And I'm going to make it the best darned horse ranch in this State!"

She was looking up at him, now, with a soft, steady warmth in her gray eyes, and suddenly Vic sat down beside her on the bunk and put his strong arm around her.

"You know, Julie, I never can keep my mind on horseflesh when I'm with you." His voice softened, grew husky. "I never was much of a hand to make pretty talk to a woman, but—"

"But what, Vic?" She smiled at him pertly. "Don't keep me in suspense!"

She felt his arm tightening around her waist, and a warm, tingling glow stole through her.

"Well, I'm just—just a no-account horse-wrangler, Julie, but I could really build up T-Dot for you for—for us. I mean—if you'd—"

"Vic Martin, are you by any chance proposing to me?"

A sheepish grin widened on the foreman's ruddy face. "Well, I sort of been buildin' up my loop for you ever since that day in the buggy, when you bucked me off. I never was sure how you felt, but—"

"The way I felt," Julie interrupted, pressing his still-cold cheeks between her palms, and drawing his lips down to hers, "was this way, Vic!"

A dizzying warmth flooded her as she felt the answering pressure of Vic's lips. She responded fiercely. Maybe that would tell the big ox how *she* felt!

THE END

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Julie held out the broom, then, as Hampton lunged for her, nimbly retreated. "Oh, no you don't!" She forced a laugh. "No clean, no kiss. Now get busy—or I might forget I'm no lady!"

The Ladder owner laughed. "Julie, you're marvelous! A man just naturally forgets all his troubles when you're around."

"When I'm around," Julie retorted saucily across her shoulder, "a man's troubles are just beginning, Mr. Hampton. Now save all your pretty talk till you've swept up," and she stooped over the fireplace and began stirring up the fire again. Her breath suddenly felt like a packed weight in her throat, and under her yellow sweater she could feel her heart pounding violently.

"Suppose Vic had gotten lost out there in the storm? Suppose he didn't get back? Her eyes strayed to a splintered log the size of a good cudgel. She imagined the sickening sound the heavy blunt end would make, struck against the side of Dade Hampton's sandy-haired head. Could she, if worst came to worst—

Her heart leaped at a sound from outside; abruptly, the door shook. Then came the voice: *Vic Martin's voice!*

"Julie! Let me in—you've got the door barred. *Julie!* It's me—Vic!"

She heard Dade Hampton's muttered oath, saw his hand go down for the gun at his hip. Warningly, she put a finger to her lips and shook her head at him; then, the firewood club still clutched in her hand, she stepped quickly to the door.

"Go away!" she called out loudly. "You've made your bed out there—now lie in it!"

DADE Hampton moved up silently beside her, his dark eyes gleaming approvingly. "That's it," he whispered eagerly. "Send him kiting. He can make it back to the line shack—maybe."

The door shook suddenly to the battering of Vic Martin's shoulders, but it was of double-plank thickness, and the heavy crossbar didn't budge under the assault.

"Julie!" Vic yelled again hoarsely. "Open up! Damn it, don't be playing games with me on a night like this!"

There was a lengthening silence, then the door shuddered violently and a piece of planking dropped to the floor.

Julie's frightened eyes sought Dade Hampton's. "Dade, look! The door—down there—I think it's coming loose!"

Dade Hampton bent down to look, and with a sickening breath, Julie lifted the club. She brought it down with all her strength, in one fierce, desperate blow.

The owner of Ladder crumpled without a sound and lay twitching at her feet.

A wave of nausea swept Julie as she lifted trembling hands to push up the cross-bar. It stuck, and she put her last waning strength against it. She got it up, staggered back.

"All right, Vic!" Julie cried. "It's all right, now."

Vic Martin plunged into the room, his nose white with frostbite, his big sheepskin mackinaw crusted with snow. He stared at her with a look of shocked disbelief, then bent his gaze to the crumpled figure on the floor.

"I—oh, Vic, I think I've killed him!" Julie moaned.

She took a faltering step, and he reached out to catch her. His anxious, wind-burned face wavered before her, then seemed slowly to fade, like a lost dream, as she collapsed in his arms. . . .

* * *

WHEN she recovered consciousness, Julie found herself on the bunk, staring up into a haze that slowly materialized into the warm, quizzical eyes of Vic Martin.

"Hi!" he greeted her, a slow grin spreading across his wide, good-humored mouth. "Feel like a spot of coffee? I've got some ready."

She sat up stiffly, still feeling a little dizzy. "I—I must have fainted. I didn't know if I—if I could—"

"But you did," Vic grinned. "He'll be lying doggo for a couple hours yet. Now let me get you that coffee. You need a bracer."

He brought her a steaming cup, and she sipped it greedily. Warmth and strength flooded back in her, and she swung her legs carefully down from the bunk. "The horses," she murmured.

Vic frowned. "Caught a half dozen. We may lose the rest. Looks like the sellin' price of T-Dot will have to go down, Julie."

given her anything beyond a momentary thrill. The touch of Vic's lips, however, had started her heart pounding like the slow, sensuous beat of a tom-tom.

Suddenly she sat up with a start. A horse had whinnied, out in the lean-to where Vic had tied the entire cavvy when it had seemed as if a storm might be brewing. She got up and padded softly to the back window. The window was completely frosted over with snow!

While she stood there, listening, another animal nickered, and then, abruptly, there was a chorus of shrill whinnying and a startling sound of trampling hoofs.

Julie turned, and stooping, shook Vic awake.

"Vic, quick! I think there's something wrong with the horses!"

Vic awakened with a grunt. "What's—what's the matter? I thought you were—"

"It's the horses!" Julie whispered tensely. "I think they've broken loose! They—"

Vic threw off his soogans and sprang up. At the window he saw the rime of snow opaquely coating the glass and snatched up his mackinaw. "Be back as quick as I can," he said. "Build up the fire—keep yourself good and warm," and then he had lighted a rusty lantern and was gone.

Julie stood staring at the pattern of snow on the floor, blown in at gale force when Vic had unbarred the door to go out. Then she turned and went to the pile of wood beside the fireplace. Outside, the shrieking wind built up to a banshee crescendo, and in this stark, almost bare room a wave of loneliness swept her suddenly.

Strangely, she found herself thinking of Vic, rather than herself. Absently, she tossed a log on the still glowing embers. Suppose something happened to him out there? Determinedly, she sought to put the thought from her mind and bent to stir up the fire. She was occupied with this task when she heard muffled footfalls; then the sound of the door creaking frostily. Without turning, she called: "Back so soon? How were the horses?"

A smug voice answered: "They were fine—till I got finished with 'em," and Julie swung her head with a little gasp.

Dade Hampton's blocky figure filled the doorway, his wool mackinaw thickly coated with snow, his eyes, under snow-fringed eyebrows, narrowed on her with a bright, impatient interest.

"You!" Julie cried. "How—how did you—"

She sucked in a quick breath as Hampton turned and deliberately pulled down the big wooden bar across the door.

"Just in case," he told her, with a wink. "But I don't think he'll be back. Not in this storm."

Julie stood rigid. "Then it was you who spooked those horses!"

"Who cares about horses?" Hampton threw down his hat and shook out of his coat. "You look mighty sweet with your hair down, Julie. And say—thanks for covering up so neat for me with Martin. The damned two-bit horse-wrangler!" he added bitterly.

Julie stared at him blankly. *"I?"* she murmured. "Covered up for *you?* I don't remember—"

"Oh, sure you do! Don't you know—when Martin said I'd let you think the Parker place was occupied? And you denied it? That was quick thinking, Sweetheart. Well, let it snow, hey? I had you figured right from the start as a girl who wouldn't miss a little fun, if the chance showed up."

She remembered then, and her heart plunged sickeningly. She had defended Dade Hampton to spite Vic. And all the time Dade had thought she was covering up—for him!

She suppressed the sudden fright spurting through her, and smiled at Hampton through stiffened lips. "Well, let's get cleaned up in here first," she said. "This cabin is a mess," and she picked up Vic's soogans and laid them, neatly folded, on the room's single bunk.

"If there's anything I hate," she said, continuing briskly to pick up about the room, "it's disorder and messiness. This place looks a sight!"

"Maybe I'll buy it," Dade Hampton murmured, "and fix it up for a little love nest."

"Oh, I don't know," Julie said boldly. "I think I'd take the big city bright lights, Dade. I like—"

"We could take care of that, too," Dade Hampton interrupted her eagerly. "But why wait? Here, let me help you clean up. I'll do it—for a kiss."

idly. "I'm guessing you let Miss Tate think the Parker place was occupied." He swung his blue, deceptively mild eyes to Julie. "That's right—isn't it, Julie?"

Stung by his aggravating complacence, Julie blurted: "No, it's not! Furthermore, are you going to turn those horses over to me, or would you rather go to jail?"

"Jail!" Vic Martin's slow grin mocked her. "Don't guess I'd worry too much about jail—since you don't own the horses yourself, yet."

Julie accused: "You crook! You must be out of your head! Uncle John left me T Dot, lock, stock and barrel."

"And," amended Vic Martin coolly, "I was appointed your guardian till you come legally of age in this State—two weeks and a day from this date."

"I don't believe it!" Julie shouted.

"All right. Ask Tom Brooks, your Uncle's lawyer."

Dade Hampton took a jerky step which brought him squarely in front of the foreman. "Damn you, Martin," he said tensely, "you can't stop Miss Tate from selling T-Dot. We'll take this to court. Those horses out there are mine, and by damn'—"

Abruptly, his big-knuckled fist drove at the foreman, knocking Vic Martin backward out of his chair.

Hampton stepped back, confident, off guard momentarily. Vic Martin sprang up from the wreckage of the splintered chair as if launched from a catapult, and before the Ladder owner could get set, smashed him twice in the face with savage, jolting blows. Hampton tried, too late, to move back, recover the initiative. He shook his head like a bewildered bull, then recklessly charged forward, his short, powerful arms chopping at Vic Martin like clumsy mallets.

The T-Dot foreman gave ground briefly, but his cool eyes were measuring Hampton now, and as the Ladder owner again lunged furiously he shook him with a pounding, hammerlike blow to the belly. Hampton grunted, bent suddenly with pain, and Vic looked at him studyingly, then snapped his head back with a jarring, up-driving right that struck like a rocket under the man's chin.

The Ladder owner sagged, and Vic grabbed at the collar of his mackinaw. With his free right hand, he looped fingers under Hampton's belt and jockied him to the door. Opening it, he gave a final shove that sent the beaten owner of Ladder sprawling into the gritty hardpan of the ranch yard.

"Now git!" he said.

He slammed the door, dropped the wooden bar across it, and turned to face Julie.

"And now," he said, "this meeting will kindly come to order."

Under its bright spots of rouge, Julie's face was drained to a dull putty color. "Let me out of here," she said tensely. "I—I want to go with him."

Vic shook his head. "Sorry. There's a bad storm making up. As your guardian, I couldn't let you take that chance."

"But—but Dade—"

"So, it's Dade, now?" Vic had built another cigarette. He sealed it with a flick of his tongue and handed it to her. "Here—you look like you needed a smoke."

She struck it angrily from his hand. "But it's murder if you send him away like this! Suppose he gets lost in the storm? Suppose—"

"There's an old line shack, half a mile down the trail. He can't miss it. I'll make up a bunk for you. The floor will do for me, soon as I've made a pot of coffee and heated up a can of beans. You wouldn't know how to make coffee, I suppose?"

Julie stared at him in tight-lipped fury. Then, suddenly, she flung herself down on the unmade bunk and her shoulders shook to dry, racking sobs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Taming a Wildcat

IT WAS dark, and the wind was a howling fury outside when Julie awoke. She stared across to the opposite side of the cabin where Vic lay wrapped in his soogans, the flickering embers of the fire throwing a soft, ruddy light on his still, peacefully composed features.

Julie thought bitterly: *He was right; I'm just a headstrong little fool. But I'd die before I'd admit it to him!*

T. Martinsen & Son seemed to her, now, a place of far away and long ago. She tried to form an image of Tony in her mind, and found she couldn't. Tony's kisses hadn't been hard to take, really, but they had never

fine stock of remounts, would be worth exactly nothing to Dade Hampton in his present predicament.

Furious, Julie had readily fallen in with the Ladder owner's suggestion that they set out at once to overtake the foreman and take over the horses under a bill-of-sale which she could sign on the spot. Turning over the deed to the ranch could come later.

So here they were, with dusk already spreading its purple mantle over the encircling mountains, and still no sign either of Vic Martin or the horses.

"I think we'd better turn back," Julie said finally. The granite peaks looked definitely dour and forbidding now, and a chill was coming into the air which sent a shivery tingle up her back. "It doesn't look as if we could catch him now, before dark."

"Too late to back-track now," Dade Hampton said, and again Julie felt the disquieting scrutiny of his dark eyes. "Best thing is to go on. We can stop over at old Ad Parker's place, if we don't come up with him soon. Ad runs a little greasy sack spread down in Whetstone Valley. It's only another mile or two."

Something in the Ladder owner's eyes—or perhaps it was the covert, increasingly prolonged glances he kept stealing at her—sent a tiny warning shiver through Julie. But it probably was too late to turn back now; and besides, didn't she have to see Vic Martin eat crow?

AHEAD, a mass of sullen black clouds were wheeling and gathering somber reinforcements among the mountain peaks. It looked as if a storm might be making up, and Julie knew, from stories she had heard her Uncle John tell, that sometimes bad blizzards hit this section, even in mid-November. A sharp wind was whipping up with the graying of the sky, and Julie could feel her feet and fingers growing numb under its frigid impact.

Some fifteen minutes later, Dade Hampton's voice pounded at her across the rising blasts of the wind.

"Look!" Hampton cried exultantly. "Down there."

Julie saw it then, hidden in a little pocket between the dark breast of two hills: a ramshackle whitewashed corral, in which a couple dozen or more horses stood with their back to the wind, huddled close to one another for warmth.

"Vic!" Julie murmured, and felt a strange relief suddenly.

"Him all right," grumbled Hampton, and Julie thought she detected an edge of disappointment in the voice. "Damn it, he beat us to Parker's."

"Well, we've caught up with him, so what difference does it make?" Julie cried impatiently. "Let's hurry. I'm freezing!"

They roweled their horses, and ten minutes later were heading down through a wind-swept draw that led into a weed-overgrown ranch yard. Smoke was curling from the stove-pipe chimney of a delapidated long ranch shack, but, save for the smoke, the place had a bleak air of having long been abandoned.

At the doorway they dismounted and ground-hitched, and without further delay, Dade Hampton pulled up the latch and thrust his chunky shoulder against the door. It crashed open, and Julie stepped into the cabin's warm interior after him.

Vic Martin sat before a small stone fireplace, his boots off and his stockinged feet perched comfortably on an upended cracker box. He glanced up without surprise as they entered.

"Hi," he said. "Move up to the fire and warm your toes. Cold out. Looks like a storm makin' up."

"You're damned right there's a storm making up!" Dade Hampton strode forward and halted, his booted feet spread aggressively, his dark, saturnine face contorted with a sudden fury. "We still know how to deal with horse thieves in this country, Martin."

"You implying I'm a horse thief, Hampton?"

"I'm not implying anything—I'm telling you!" Dade Hampton blurted out vehemently. "Now fog out of here before I boot you out. Miss Tate and I will see that these horses get to Custer Junction. They're mine, now."

Vic Martin deliberately touched a match to his freshly built cigarette. "Miss Tate yours, too? If not, it might be a little awkward for her, staying here overnight with an hombre of your reputation."

"What the devil are you insinuating, Martin?"

"Just a thought," Vic Martin answered

"It's Len. Please let me in, Laurie. I've got to talk to you."

"Go 'way," she said.

"Not until I tell you I love you."

"Go 'way," she said again, but with less spirit.

She held her breath and waited, but there was no further sound from beyond the door. It wasn't that she was disappointed, but still. . . .

What else did I expect? Laurie asked herself bitterly.

She had dinner sent up to her rooms, and then couldn't touch a bite. Grimly she set herself to face the prospect of returning back home. When the knock came again, she jumped as if she had been shot, and ran into the hall.

Len—Len—it has to be Len, her heart sang as she flung open the door. But he wasn't there.

Two children, no bigger'n a minute, regarded Laurie wonderingly.

"Do you want something?" Laurie asked, after she had recovered from her astonishment.

The little boy and girl looked at each other, then back at Laurie.

She smiled kindly. "What is it, children?"

The little boy managed a very weak "'Lo," and then promptly closed up again.

Laurie knelt, so that her blue eyes were on a level with the two flaxen heads. "Look," she said softly. "Won't you tell me who you are?"

"Reckon I'll have to do all the talkin', anyway," a familiar voice said.

Laurie looked up swiftly, her heart prancing like a wild stallion.

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"These mites here are my neighbors," Len Martin went on. "Petey and Joan Anders, meet Miss Laurie Drew."

"Ter meetcha," the children chanted, having at last found their tongues.

"How—do you do," Laurie said slowly, getting to her feet.

Len looked sternly at each of the youngsters. "Petey and Joan rode all the way into town to ask you if you wouldn't stay in Aurora and be their teacher. Isn't that what you were going to say?"

Two little heads bobbed eagerly up and down.

"These young 'uns, and several more just like 'em, need you awfully bad, Laurie," Len said. "Won't you stay—for their sake?"

Laurie laughed. "I might," she said, happiness ringing in her voice. "For them—and for the sake of a dumb cow-country editor who can't even put two and two together."

Before she knew it, she was in Len's arms, being kissed, and kissed—and kissed!

"I'm plumb willin' to take lessons—" he said, hugging her tightly—"for the rest of my life."

Petey and Joan's eyes grew larger and larger, as they watched the goings on.

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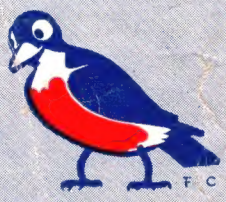
when the fall—and forget it till the first 

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